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Conservation and Preservation of Traditional Folk Music in Sri Lanka

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Abstract: Folk music traditions are appreciated across the world for their capacity to maintain and convey cultural identities while exhibiting the different manifestations of communities. This research aims to examine the folk music archiving, preservation, and conservation practices in Sri Lanka. The objective is to understand the practices related to the preservation and conservation of folk music. The methodology used in this study is a qualitative case study, and data were gathered using a literature review, semi-structured interviews, and observations. Snowball sampling was used as the sampling method, and the collected data were analyzed using content analysis. The study identified conservation practices employed by organizations and individual practitioners. Even though the country has many folk music items, none of the musical items are inscribed on the UNESCO Sri Lankan national list. It is evident from the results that no specific attention has been devoted to identifying endangered musical genres or preparing inventories. It was also identified that there is a lack of attention to digitizing techniques, which can preserve sound qualities in early recordings. In addition to the poor facilities in the respective centers in Sri Lanka, there is a tendency for recorded tapes to be damaged. These challenges necessitate the exploration of innovative approaches, community engagement, and policy support to ensure the continued conservation and promotion of folk music in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Conservation, Folk music, Preservation, Sri Lanka

Introduction

Folk music traditions are appreciated across the world for their capacity to maintain and convey cultural identities while exhibiting the different manifestations of communities. Folk songs have been sung based on events that are extremely close to people's lives, thus, they can offer access to the country's heritage. According to Karpeles (1955, p. 6), the preliminary definition of folk music established by the International Folk Music Council is "music that has been submitted through the process of oral transmission." It is an evolutionary consequence that is dependent on the continuity, variation, and selection of environments." Folk music derives from an oral musical heritage. Folk music, according to Lornell (1993, p. 10), is "music with strong regional ties or a racial/ethnic identity and direct links to its past". Folk music, according to Karim (2020),

is an essential aspect of art and culture. Folk music, according to the Encyclopedia Britannica (2022), is a traditional kind of typically rural music that was mostly passed down through families and other small social groups, but the Columbia Encyclopedia (2000) defines it as anonymous creation music conveyed orally. Folk music reflects "national ideology", "national language", "nationalism," and "national code" in the era of globalization (Kaztuganova, 2021). The continuation of a living musical tradition that draws on material from its past and employs the resources and experiences of the past in present musical performances is what the conservation of a musical tradition entails (Stubington, 1987). According to Carugno (2018), traditional folk music may be considered the legacy of the entire local community, and the owner of traditional folk music is not a singular composer, but all the people of a local community. In the current era of widespread globalization, traditional music may be in danger of being neglected or even forgotten, along with local identities and cultures in general, making the preservation of these traditional music elements one of the most important goals (D'Agostino, 2020).

Folk music is an important part of Sri Lanka's cultural heritage, acting as a rich tapestry that represents the country's customs, beliefs, and varied ethnic populations, and it serves as an association between the past, present, and future. However, the preservation and conservation of these valuable musical traditions face various challenges in the modern era. The purpose of this research paper is to investigate and analyze the practices and challenges of folk music conservation in Sri Lanka. The primary objective is to understand the historical background, current practices, challenges, and potential solutions related to the preservation and promotion of folk music in Sri Lanka. The specific goals of this research paper include examining the historical origins of folk music in Sri Lanka, analyzing the current conservation practices employed by organizations and individuals, identifying the challenges faced in preserving folk music traditions and exploring potential solutions to ensure the long-term sustainability of these traditions. Understanding the conservation practices and challenges of folk music in Sri Lanka is crucial for preserving the rich cultural heritage of the country and ensuring the continuity of traditional music traditions.

Literature review

The Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage was created by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2003 (UNESCO, 2022). The purposes of this Convention (UNESCO, 2022, p. 5) are: "(a) to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage; (b) to ensure respect for the intangible cultural heritage of the communities, groups, and individuals concerned; (c) to raise awareness at the local, national, and international levels of the importance of the intangible cultural heritage, and of ensuring mutual appreciation thereof; (d) to provide for international cooperation and assistance". UNESCO (2022) figures show that 180 nations signed up for the agreement between 2003 and 2022, with Sri Lanka signing in 2008. Even though there are many Intangible Cultural Heritage items, only two elements: Rukada Natya -2018 (Puppet Drama) and Dumbara Rata Kalala- 2021 are inscribed in the UNESCO Sri Lankan national list (UNESCO - Sri Lanka, n.d.).

Stubington (1987) discussed how Australian folk music and Australian Aboriginal music are currently being preserved and conserved. According to Stubington (1987), the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS) is responsible for the preservation of traditional Aboriginal music. Sound archiving in Australia is one of the institute's functions. The institution has a large collection of over 20,000 field research cassettes. By collecting, preserving, and making accessible the records of organizations and the papers of composers, performers, and scholars of music, as well as other distinguished participants, the Hargrove Music Library Archives documents and raises awareness of Northern California's and beyond's significant musical heritage. It features over 125 volumes by and about composers, performers, musicologists, critics, and other notable players in Northern California's musical scene (Library Guides: Hargrove Music Library Archives, 2023). Imjai et al. (2013) discussed the Preservation and Development of Central Thai Folk Music for Cultural Inheritance. The authors determined that the conservation of Central Thai folk music may be accomplished by building and increasing its significance, knowledge, and abilities, establishing cultural networks, and establishing a welfare services system to assist cultural artists and cultural inheritance. Ethno Music is a multimedia digital library that was created by the authors to preserve Slovenian folk music and dance culture (Marolt et al., 2009). Pollens (2016) stated practical advice on the handling, storage, display, and use of historic musical instruments in museums and other settings. The Vietnamese Institute for Musicology is primarily in charge of gathering, preserving, studying, and disseminating traditional Vietnamese music both within Vietnam and around the world (Vietnamese Institute for Musicology in Brief, n.d.). A traditional music museum run by the Guangxi Art University serves as a repository for cultural artifacts and a site for their preservation (Zhi, 2023). Furthermore, the author stated that the main theme of this music museum is the music culture of Guangxi. Schippers and Grant (2016) highlight the importance of transmission in the sustainability of music genres throughout the world, as well as its relevance in many programs aimed at encouraging sustainability. Like other forms of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), Indigenous music cultures have been adversely affected by significant social, economic, technological, and ecological modifications (Rajapaksha, 2004). Globalization, industrialization, and shifting demography pose obstacles to the preservation of folk music. Folk music is also

threatened by demographic trends and limited resources. To solve these issues, education and awareness programs should be developed, and efforts to document and archive should be prioritized. Cultural interaction, community involvement, and internet platforms can all help preserve and promote folk music (Louis, 2023).

Methodology

This research paper employs a qualitative case study approach to investigate the practices and challenges of folk music conservation in Sri Lanka. Data were gathered using a literature review, semi-structured interviews, and observations. Purposive sampling was used as the sampling method in this study. The collected data were analyzed using content analysis.

Results and Discussion

In the 1930s, Devar Surya Sena was particularly fond of folk music and folk songs sung by common people. He proceeded to learn the traditional Sinhalese music and dance traditions that were distinctive to the Sinhala culture. He traveled around Sri Lanka in search of people who knew traditional folk music. Places, where he collected folk songs, are listed on a map in the Music of Sri Lanka book (Sena, 2008, p. X). He methodically collected and wrote down varieties of folk songs such as the harvesting and reaping songs, the fisherman's songs, vannahams, lullabies, love songs, and children's songs that describe the people's way of life. After collecting folk songs and Vannahams, he decided to introduce them to the public by conducting concerts. For the first time, Sinhala music was introduced into the Church services of Sri Lanka in 1932 (Sena, 2008). According to the participant, between 1960 and 1970, the Art Council's Gemi Gee Anumandalaya (Folk Song Committee) gathered and archived folk songs. W. B. Makuloluwa, Ananda Jayasinghe, and C. de S. Kulatilake were all instrumental in this procedure. Currently, Gemi Gee Anumandalaya is not available, and instead of that, the Arts Council has formed a State Music Advisory Board to advise and help the overall progress of Sri Lankan music, as well as to sustain a thriving community of composers, musicians, and singers, music groups, and organizations. The Arts Council and Music Panel encourage various musical genres in order to satisfy the requirements of artists and make music accessible to all. Furthermore, findings stated that the Sinhala Music Research Unit of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) captured and documented Sri Lankan folk songs and music with the assistance of Lever Brothers Cultural Conservation Trust funds. C. de S. Kulatilake oversaw this folk song documentation effort. According to Kulatilake (n.d.), this effort gathered over 250 cassettes from the majority of Sri Lanka. During the interview, the participant claimed that the Sinhala Music Research Unit is now unavailable and that there is no practice of field recording folk music. According to a participant, the Folk Music Conservation Center was founded in 2010 under the Ministry of Culture not only to gather and conserve the country's vanishing traditional musical legacy but also for future generations' education and learning. This center is presently running well, is affiliated with the National Archives, and has a large collection of folk music archives. The C. de S. Kulatilake Archival and Research Unit of

the University of Visual and Performing Arts (UVPA) was founded in 1990 with the primary goal of preserving and continuing materials (audiovisual archiving) as cultural heritage. This Kulatillake research center houses a substantial collection of audio and video folk music archives. According to one participant, the UVPA Department of Ethnomusicology's research and archiving unit is also actively collecting and protecting Sri Lankan traditional music. According to the study, the National Library and Documentation Services Board maintains a digital collection of folk music recorded in the 1980s.

Several challenges in the preservation and conservation of folk music can be discussed as follows. According to the research, the country did not perform a folk music census and did not preserve a collection inventory. It would have been simple to establish what should be saved first if such an inventory existed. It should also be noted that no specific attention has been devoted to identifying endangered musical genres and patterns. One of the major challenges is the unavailability of suitable playback devices for early recorded magnetic tapes and the absence of suitable restoration equipment in archival centers. It was also identified that there is a lack of attention to digitizing techniques, which can preserve sound qualities in early recordings. In addition, there are several conditions to be met in order to store the recorded tapes. However, as a result of poor facilities in the respective centers in Sri Lanka, there is a tendency for recorded tapes to be damaged. Further, most of the recorded tapes are the originals, and there are no backup copies of them. Since the recorded materials are on CD and DVD, a preservation procedure should be followed throughout. The lack of necessary resource persons in sound and audio-visual archiving and preservation, a lack of awareness of folk music, a lack of appropriate programs to strengthen the musicians and improve the taste of folk music among the community, and poor financial support result in the above-mentioned challenges.

Folk music does not exist just because it has been recorded and archived. It must pass them on in order for others to learn and sing them. Furthermore, it must be written in such a way that future generations can benefit from it.

Conclusion

The findings reveal that organizations like the Folk Music Conservation Centre, Research and Archive Centers of Universities, the Music Research Unit of Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation, the National Library, and individual practitioners have made significant contributions to the documentation, preservation, and promotion of folk music in Sri Lanka. Their archival work, research initiatives, educational programs, and performances have played a crucial role in safeguarding and perpetuating traditional music forms. Devar Surya Sena, W. B. Makuloluwa, and C. de S. Kulatillake have significantly contributed to the exploration and documentation of Sri Lankan folk music. However, the study has also highlighted several challenges faced in the conservation process. Urbanization, globalization, and diminishing interest among the younger generation pose significant threats to the sustainability of folk music traditions (Louis, 2023). These challenges necessitate the exploration of innovative approaches, community engagement, and policy support to ensure the continued conservation and promotion of folk music in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, it is essential

for stakeholders, including cultural institutions, researchers, musicians, policymakers, and communities, to collaborate and develop comprehensive strategies for the long-term sustainability of folk music traditions. This may involve integrating folk music education into school curricula, fostering community-based initiatives, providing support for local musicians, and leveraging digital platforms for wider dissemination of folk music. By addressing the identified challenges and implementing potential solutions, Sri Lanka can safeguard its rich cultural heritage and ensure the transmission of folk music traditions to future generations.

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