

Traditional Drumming in Sri Lanka: It's Contribution to Communication in the Buddhist Context

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Abstract

The proud land of Sri Lanka has a rich and colorful heritage of religious and cultural traditions of the world. The cultural basis of this is the complex relationship between the Sinhalese people and their deep Buddhist heritage. The traditional art of drumming is very strongly connected to building the correlation between the people in the performance of Buddhist religious rituals and social needs. Sri Lankan drumming, an ancient art form based on Sinhala Buddhist rituals, is prominent among them. This study reveals the amazing role of drumming as a mode of communication for the spiritual well-being of the Sri Lankan nation. It aspires to bequeath to the world the harmony between drumming and sacred rituals that have resonated through the ages, creating a unique symphony of culture and spirituality within the lush landscapes of Sri Lanka. The main objective of this research is to understand the role of traditional drumming as a unique form of communication in the Buddhist context and how drum rhythms and beats convey messages and meanings. In this research, as the research methodology, I based the study on Buddhist and drumming-related scholarly works, historical documents, and cultural records. Interviews were conducted with traditional drummers, religious leaders, and community leaders. Here, I can introduce the research method using the knowledge I have gained as a researcher and a lecturer at the university related to drumming. The problem of this research can be stated whether there is any importance of using drums in the performance of Buddhist religious rituals. Drumming has been deeply intertwined with Buddhism since time immemorial and is a fundamental part of religious rites and rituals, emphasizing how it goes beyond mere auditory expression and serves as an essential means of conveying messages and building cultural and social cohesion.

Keywords: Cultural customs, Ethics, Sinhalese people, Buddhist religion, Drumming culture, communication

1. Introduction

Along with human evolution, in various stages of the history of Sri Lanka, people used drum species for entertainment, hunting animals for food, rituals and festivals, etc. Among them, examples of literary works such as Mahavamsa, Bodhivamsa, and Thupavamsa can be mentioned.

Sri Lanka, an island nation abundant in religious and cultural traditions, is characterized by a diverse tapestry of ethnicities and religions coexisting harmoniously. Buddhism, the

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primary religion of the Sinhalese people, plays a pivotal role in shaping the ethical framework of the nation. Alongside this religious influence, a distinctive form of communication has emerged, marked by profound symbolic resonances that surpass spoken language. This unique mode of communication is encapsulated in the traditional drumming practices of Sri Lanka, woven seamlessly into the diverse rituals and beliefs that permeate every facet of daily life.

For centuries, Sri Lankan traditional drumming has been an integral part of the Buddhist religious context, contributing significantly to the communicative function of this vibrant culture. Rooted in the ancient traditions of the Sinhalese people, the rhythms and melodies of these drums have become a language of their own, conveying messages, emotions, and symbolic meanings within the sacred realm of Buddhism.

This research embarks on a journey to uncover the profound contributions of Sri Lankan traditional drumming to the communicative function within the Buddhist religious context. It delves into the historical evolution of drumming practices, examines the diverse array of drums utilized in Buddhist rituals, explores the symbolic significance and emotional impact of drumming, and investigates how drumming functions as a means of communication between various segments of society. Furthermore, this study explores the immersive quality of drumming in rituals and assesses the influence of modernization and globalization on this cherished tradition. At its core, this research seeks to underscore the multifaceted and dynamic role of drumming as an essential means of transmitting, preserving, and experiencing religious, cultural, and social messages in the vibrant tapestry of Sri Lankan Buddhism. As we embark on this exploration, we are invited to listen not only to the resonant beats of the drums but also to the stories, emotions, and beliefs they convey stories that have echoed through the corridors of time and continue to bridge the realms of the earthly and the divine.

Many people are unaware of the profound connection between Buddhism and the communicative features of Sri Lankan traditional drumming. Therefore, the role of drumming and its religious and social significance can be analyzed. The problem of this research can be stated whether there is any importance of using drums in the performance of Buddhist religious rituals. Drumming has been deeply intertwined with Buddhism since time immemorial and is a fundamental part of religious rites and rituals, emphasizing how it goes beyond mere auditory expression and serves as an essential means of conveying messages and building cultural and social cohesion.

2. Literature Review

Previous investigations into the realm of traditional drumming have provided valuable insights into its historical roots, cultural significance, and contextual dimensions. Scholars and practitioners alike have meticulously chronicled diverse facets of Sri Lankan traditional drumming, encompassing its genesis, evolutionary trajectory, stylistic nuances, and live performances. The findings from these studies have not only established a solid foundation of knowledge but have also set the stage for further delving into the communicative functions of drumming within the framework of Buddhist religious practices. Unearthing information about traditional drumming in Sri Lanka heavily relies on historical records and cultural artifacts. These encompass a spectrum of sources such as ancient texts, inscriptions, manuscripts, and visual depictions like paintings and sculptures. Through a meticulous examination of these primary sources, researchers have successfully charted the course of Sri

Lanka's traditional drumming, unraveling its early development and elucidating the cultural and religious influences that have shaped its evolution.

3. Evolution and Origin of Traditional Drumming in Sri Lanka

The evolution and origins of traditional drumming in Sri Lanka are deeply intertwined with the island's rich history and cultural heritage. It should be noted that this rhythmic art form did not emerge in isolation. It is the result of various influences that have shaped Sri Lankan society over the millennia. Traditional drumming in Sri Lanka traces its roots back to the indigenous practices of the island's original inhabitants. In this regard, historical literature such as *Deepavansaya*, *Thupavansaya*, including *Mahavansaya* can reveal information as written evidence. These ancient communities used drums for various rituals, celebrations, and communication with the spirit world. These early drums were often made of natural materials such as wood and animal skins. It is mentioned in the *Mahavamsa* that when Prince Vijaya and his entourage came to Sri Lanka from India, the wedding rituals were performed by beating the drums of the Yaksha tribal society at Sirasavastupura city in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka's geographical proximity to South India also played a significant role in the development of traditional percussion. Cultural exchanges between the two regions influenced drumming styles and techniques, resulting in a unique blend of Sri Lankan and South Indian musical elements.

Traditional drumming became an integral part of religious rituals, cultural events, and social events in Sri Lanka. Different types of drums were developed to serve specific purposes in these contexts, leading to the creation of a variety of drums used in different settings. One of the key moments in the evolution of drumming was in B.C. With the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka in the 3rd century. The advent of Buddhism brought not only a new religion but also a new musical and cultural dimension. Buddhist rituals and ceremonies required music and drumming, which led to the integration of these practices with religious ceremonies. It is described in the book *Sinhala Bodhi Vamsaya* that when Sanghamita Bhikkhuni (Buddhist nun) brought the southern branch of Sri Maha Bodhi to Sri Lanka, 18 castes came from India to play drums and perform other duties.

In summary, the evolution and culture of traditional drumming in Sri Lanka can be said to have developed by drawing from indigenous roots, embracing Buddhist traditions, and absorbing Indian influences. Today, Sri Lankan drumming remains a testament to the enduring spirit of a culture that finds its voice in the rhythmic beats of its ancient drumming.

4. Types of Drums and Wind Instruments used in Buddhist Rituals.

Sri Lanka's diverse and vibrant culture has given rise to various types of drums that play an integral role in Buddhist rituals and ceremonies. Each type of drum is carefully selected and tailored to perform specific functions within the religious context, contributing to the sensory richness and spiritual significance of these rituals. Here are some notable drums used in Sri Lankan Buddhist rituals:



Figure 1. An occasion to perform the daily drumming ritual at the temple of the sacred tooth relic in Kandy, Sri Lanka

4.1. Davula drum

Davula is one of the most prominent drums in Sri Lankan Buddhist rituals. It is a double-headed drum with cylindrical wooden shells covered with animal skin membranes. Davula drums are known for their thunderous and resonant sounds and are ideal for announcing the start of festivals, processions, and other important religious events. They are often played in pairs, creating a powerful and rhythmic ensemble that symbolizes the auspicious nature of the occasion.

4.2. Tammattama Drum

The tammattama is a unique and visually striking drum. A hemispherical wooden shape is finished with leather on the circular part. These drums are played by striking the heads with sticks or kadippu arranged in a circle. The tammattama creates a distinct melody that complements the rhythmic beat of the other drums. It is commonly used to enhance the musicality of processions and rituals.

4.3. Horanewa (Flute)

Horanewa is a reed pipe (flute) that is unique to Sri Lanka. A brass hemispherical section is attached to a wooden tube with five holes. Five-note tones are played that are unique to it. Horanewa, Davula, and Tammattama are played only during the pujas in temples.

4.4. Conch shell

This is a natural object and is obtained from the bottom of the ocean. However, it is confirmed by checking the respective symbols that it belongs to Ashta Mangala Vastu (Auspicious symbol). This instrument has been used in India and Sri Lanka as a musical instrument since ancient times. In every Buddhist temple in Sri Lanka, this conch is played along with drums during pujas.

4.5. Gataberaya

Gatabera is a drum that is played using fingers and palms. It is a type of drum with two heads. The circle on both sides is smaller in circumference and the center is spherical. This drum is usually used in Buddhist rituals and special occasions and for offerings.

5. The contribution of the use of percussion patterns and rhythms to communication

It is the acceptance of the Sinhala society that the Sinhala drumming technique, which has been used in Sri Lanka since prehistoric times, took a religious form after the spread of Buddhism. Accordingly, it is customary to play the above-mentioned drums and other musical instruments during daily worship services in many historic Buddhist temples including Sri Dalada Maligawa, Sri Maha Bodhi, Ruwanvelisaya. At every religious place, a drumming event known as Aluyam Duraya (Morning Drumming) can be introduced in the morning. This playing ritual is seen to be played continuously for about an hour. It symbolizes the beginning of the religious rituals of the day to inform society. Accordingly, after cleaning the environment necessary to worship the Buddha, preparing offerings, offering flowers, offering Gilanpasa, lighting lamps, etc., the said offerings are offered to the Buddha and worshiped. As above, these rituals are also performed in the evening and are known as Handa Duraya (Evening Drumming). In Sri Lankan society, the full moon day is known as Poya Day, and many religious rituals are performed on that day. In many temples, continuous drumming is seen from the Poya day till the next morning. The drumming event is called Bera Poya Hevisi. To inform the people of this ritual which is held on Pohoya day, the following drum track is played by drumming. “**Jen Jen Jen Kita Kiti tat tarikita.....**” Aluyamdura is played after playing the above drumbeat. After that beautiful drum lines to different tunes are played for about two hours. After that, the drumming starts again in the evening around 6 pm. It begins with: “**Je jega je jega jega jen kita kiti tat...**” and starts the drumming again. After hearing the drums for the people, the people make sure to come to the temple. People have a good understanding and adaptation to this drum culture.

The Sinhala Buddhists as well as the Maha Sangha had enough understanding to understand the meaning of each drum used by the old Sinhala drummers to convey messages. It seems that every Buddhist festival had a prominent place in Sinhala drumming from the beginning to the end. There is a special drumming called Purappattuwa to let the people know that a religious ceremony is going on in the temple and to make an emergency call. It is customary for people to come to the temple very early when the Purappattuwa is played. Purappattuwa is a verse piece with fast rhythms played by Thammattam. An example of that Purappattuwa drum verse is mentioned below.

Jen Jen Jen Jen Krrak Kitak
Kunda Kunda Kunda Krrak Kitak
Jen Kita Jen Krrak Kitak
Kunda Gata Kunda Krrak Kitak
Jen Kitak Kunda Kitak
Kunda Kunda Kunda ...

Pirith Sajjavana (Pirith Chanting) can be mentioned as a ritual that is always present in homes and temples in Sinhala Buddhist culture. Drumming is an essential part of bringing the Maha Sangharatna to the relevant place for sermons. The special feature of this is that the invitation is done with a drum section specially built for it. This drumming method of communication is used to understand the Sangharatna and the surrounding villagers. The drum verse which is played to invite to the Pirith chanting is as follows.

Jenga Tarikita Jen Kitakka ///
Jenga Tarikita /// Jen Kitakka
Jen Jen Jen Jen Kitakka.

Having understood the meaning of the above drum verse, the bhikkhus quickly get ready and line up to leave for the Pirith chanting. After this, a special drum beat is played to inform the people that the Sangha is coming to the respective place for Pirith Sajjavana. This is known as "Wadammana Padaya". The drum verse is **Taka Jengata Jengata Taka.... ///**. With this, the Sangharatna comes to the row. In each of these drumming, a conch shell is played depending on the occasion. It is customary to play the tunes of Buddhist chants using Horanewa. Among the rituals performed for the Buddha by the Gata Beraya (drum) is the auspicious drumming or the Magul Bera drumming.

As mentioned above, the cases of communication through drumming can be shown at length through the study of Buddhist culture with many illustrations, but I compared them in a way that is sufficient for this research.

6. The Importance of Sri Lankan Traditional Drumming to Communicative Function in the Sri Lankan Buddhist Religious Context

The importance of traditional Sri Lankan drumming to the communication function in the Sri Lankan Buddhist religious context cannot be overstated. These ancient and culturally rich drumming traditions serve as a vibrant and versatile means of communication within the context of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. This research summarizes the profound importance of traditional drumming in the religious context.

6.1. Ritual initiation and signaling

Traditional drumming, especially the Davula, Tammattama, is responsible for signaling the beginning of religious ceremonies. The thunderous rhythm pierces the air, attracts the attention of all participants, marks the beginning of sacred events, and creates a sense of reverence and anticipation.

6.2. Expressing symbolic meanings

The sound of drums in Sri Lankan Buddhist rituals is imbued with deep symbolic meanings. Specific rhythms and beats communicate messages and set the tone for different phases of a ritual. They symbolize transitions, highlight spiritual significance, and express the essence of Buddhist teachings, allowing participants to connect with the deep symbolism of the tradition.

6.3. Improving emotional states

Drumming addresses the emotional states of ritual participants. Drumming has the power to evoke a wide range of emotions, from devotion to joy and celebration, with the melodious sound and harmonious tones of the Conch shell, Horanewa, Tammattame, and Davula. It helps participants navigate the emotional landscape of the event.

6.4. Harmony and social cohesion

Drumming creates a sense of harmony and social harmony in the Buddhist community. When several drummers join together, their harmonious rhythms symbolize the interconnectedness of all practitioners, promoting a common sense of purpose and identity.

6.5. Conservation of cultural and spiritual heritage

Sri Lankan traditional drumming serves as a guardian of cultural and spiritual heritage. It preserves ancient narratives, myths, and legends through its rhythmic compositions, and ensures that cultural knowledge is passed down from generation to generation.

6.6. Universal language of expression

Drumming transcends linguistic barriers and serves as a universal language. It enables communication and connection between people from different linguistic backgrounds, making it an inclusive medium of expression in Sri Lankan society.

In essence, traditional drumming is the beating heart of the Sri Lankan Buddhist religious context. Its rhythms and melodies convey messages, evoke emotions, and connect people with the deeply rooted cultural and spiritual traditions of Sri Lankan Buddhism. As a dynamic and sacred form of expression, it plays a key role in shaping the religious experience and preserving the rich heritage of this island nation.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, our exploration into the realm of traditional drumming in Sri Lanka has unraveled a vibrant narrative, revealing the profound contribution of this age-old art form to communication within the Buddhist context. As we embarked on this journey, we first delved into the evolution and origin of traditional drumming in Sri Lanka, tracing its roots deep into the historical and cultural fabric of the island. Our examination extended to the diverse array of drums and wind instruments used in Buddhist rituals, each instrument carrying its unique resonance in the spiritual tapestry.

A pivotal revelation emerged as we investigated the contribution of percussion patterns and rhythms to communication. Beyond being a melodic expression, traditional drumming proved to be a sophisticated language, conveying messages that transcend spoken words. Each beat and rhythm became a symbolic element in the intricate communication methods embedded in the religious rituals of the Sinhalese people.

Our study illuminated the paramount importance of Sri Lankan traditional drumming in the communicative function within the Buddhist religious context. This ancient art form has not only preserved cultural heritage but has also played a vital role in shaping the very essence of Buddhist practices. The drumming patterns, infused with deep symbolism, serve as a medium to convey spiritual messages, fostering a profound connection between the practitioners and their beliefs.

In essence, the importance of Sri Lankan traditional drumming extends beyond mere musicality; it is a living testament to the spiritual, cultural, and communicative richness of the Sinhalese people. As we conclude this exploration, we are left with a deeper appreciation for the intricate language of drumming that resonates through the ages, bridging the tangible and intangible aspects of the Buddhist experience in Sri Lanka.

8. Proposal

Finally, as a further step in this research, I propose that there is an opportunity to research Traditional Drumming in Sri Lanka: Traditional Drumming Principles and Study Methods.

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