

Commonalities of Creative Resistance: The Regional Nationalism of Rapiyel Tennakoon's *Bat Language* and Sunil Santa's "Song for the Mother Tongue"

Abstract

This article highlights commonalities of regional nationalism between the poetry and song of two *Hela Havula* (The Pure Sinhala Fraternity) members: Rapiyel Tennakoon and Sunil Santha. I reveal how their creative works advocated indigenous empowerment in opposition to Indian cultural hegemony, and against state solicitations for foreign consultation about Sinhala language planning and Sinhalese music development. Tennakoon challenged the negative portrayal of Sri Lankan characters in the Indian epic, the Ramayana, and Santa fashioned a Sri Lankan form of song that could stand autonomously from Indian musical influence. Tennakoon lashed out against the Sinhala-language dictionary office's hire of German professor Wilhelm Geiger as consultant, and Santa quit Radio Ceylon in 1953 when the station appealed to Professor S.N. Ratanjankar, from North India, for advice on designing a national form of Sri Lankan music. Such dissent betrays an effort to define the nation not in relation to the West, but to explicitly position it in relation to India. A study of Tennakoon's and Santa's careers and compositions supplement the many works that focus on how native elite in South Asia fashioned a modern national culture in relation to the West, with an awareness of the regional nationalist, non-elite communities—who also had a stake in defining the nation—that were struggling against inter-South Asian cultural hegemony.

Keywords: Regional nationalism; Sinhala poetry; Sinhala music; Linguistic politics; Song text; Modernist reforms.

Rapiyel Tennakoon and Wawuluwa

In 1927, the Sinhala-medium Nittambuwe Buddhist Teacher's Training College appointed the radical Sinhala language reformer, Munidasa Cumaratunga, as the school's principal.¹ He soon developed a close intellectual camaraderie with the history and geography instructor, Rapiyel Tennakoon (Kudatihi 11). Tennakoon was one of the earliest to join Cumaratunga's *Hela Havula* (Pure Sinhala Fraternity) when it formed in 1941, and presided as president from 1949 until 1965 (Ganevatte 8).² He also was a devoted student of Cumaratunga's manual for composing Sinhala metered poetry, *Virit Vākiya* ('Statement on [Sinhala poetic] Meters') (1938).³ Tennakoon's daughter has described how her father passionately, even obsessively, composed verse in the metered style prescribed by *Virit Vākiya*, throughout day and night (N. Tennakoon 313). In two years Tennakoon completed eleven metered long poems, four of which comprised more than one thousand quatrains each.

As part of a book series, *Ruwan Vāla* ('A Chain of Gems'), exclusively featuring the poetry of *Hela Havula* members, Cumaratunga's publishing press released three of Tennakoon's extended works: *Wawuluwa* (Bat Language) (1939), *Hāvilla* (The Curse) (1940), and *Dā Vinaya* ('Discipline of the Nation') (1941).⁴ All three were highly satirical polemics; *Hāvilla* lampooned zealous Sinhalese Buddhist religious practices (Sannasgala *et al.*, 126) and *Dā Vinaya* satirized corrupt native politics (Kudatihi 39-62). Cumaratunga was particularly enamoured with Tennakoon's *Wawuluwa*; he forwarded the poem with an extended introduction that devoted sizeable sections to *rasa* theory and character analysis ("Wiwisuma" 51-75), and claimed the poem would win a Nobel Prize if translated into English (90).

Rapiyel Tennakoon and his *Hela Havula* contemporaries like the poets Amarasiri Gunawadu, Jayamaha Vellala, and *bhikku* Warakagoda Silruwan Himi composed erudite, and sometimes cryptic, long poems markedly divergent from the poetry composed by the first and second generation of "Colombo poets." Both the first generation, who began publishing in the late nineteenth century, and the second generation, who started around 1920, favoured the *sivpada* meter: rhyming quatrains with an equal amount of *matra* (syllables). Generally speaking, the first generation of Colombo poets favoured Buddhist, edificatory, patriotic, and children's poetry, while the second wrote of romance, nature, and the plight of the poor (Wanshatilaka 46). *Hela* poets, like the four shown in Figure 1.1, distinguished their poetry by channelling *Hela Havula* ideologies into their works, expanding the meter repertoire typically used by Colombo poets, employing a more arcane literary register of language, and appending exegetical commentaries onto their poetry authored by their close friends and colleagues.

¹ A Fulbright Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Fellowship in 2010 funded the research for this article. I am grateful for the anonymous reviewer's detailed comments and insightful translation suggestions.

² Radical language reformer Munidasa Cumaratunga had established this group in 1941 to revive, promote, and elevate the Sinhala language. Cumaratunga passionately believed that reforming, uplifting, and fostering loyalty for the Sinhala language and literature was the most necessary work of pre-independence cultural reform. Members of the *Hela Havula* wrote with a syntax grammatically attuned with classical (13-17th century) Sinhala and they tried to "purge" the Sinhala lexicon of Sanskrit influence.

³ See Tennakoon's acknowledgement of this work's influence in *Wawuluwa*, 97.

⁴ The series commenced in 1936 with Cumaratunga's *Piya Samara* ('Remembering Father').



Figure 1.1: *Siya Bas Waduwo* (“Developers of the Native Language”) in *Subasa* (1941: 61). From top-left clockwise: Rapiyel Tennakoon, Jayamaha Vellala, Ven. Warakagoda Silruwan and Aryasena Ashuboda (later changed his name to “Ariesen Ahubudu”).

A conspicuous feature of *Hela Havula* poetry was the usage of the *ä - karaya* letter, the third letter of the Sinhala alphabet that makes a vowel sound like the “a” in “cat”. Cumaratunga believed the *ä - karaya* to be the “purest” indigenous letter of Sinhala since it does not exist in other South Asian languages. He and his followers in the *Hela Havula* suffixed the *ä - karaya* letter onto nouns to convey the genitive case, verbs for past participles, and prepositions for the emphatic and predication marker (G. Cumaratunga 445-49).⁵ The *Hela Havula*, whose members were primarily from the Durava caste and Sinhalese Catholic community, also characteristically rejected the authority of the *Mahavamsa* chronicle’s assertion that the Sinhalese had descended from the North Indian prince Vijaya. Typically, Vijaya and his retinue were said to have arrived by boat to the island of Lanka in the fifth century B.C. after being banished from either northwest

⁵ See Gair and Karunatilaka 7, 11, 72-73, and Fairbanks, Gair and De Silva 188, for their analysis of these grammatical features in standard Sinhala.

Coperahewa remarks that Cumaratunga also used this letter in reverence for Gurulugomi’s 12th century *Amavatura*, a narrative of incidents in the Buddha’s life. Gurulugomi heavily employed the *ä - karaya* letter and favoured Sanskrit *tadbhavas* (modified cognates of Sanskrit and Pali loanwords) over *tatsamas* (unmodified Sanskrit and Pali loanwords), giving his diction a distinct *hela* or pure Sinhala flavour, at a time when Sinhala texts were filled with Sanskrit *tatsamas* (*Visi vana Siyavase* 71).

or northeast India. Munidasa Cumaratunga and his followers, by contrast, believed that the original roots of the Sinhalese were with the “Helas,” indigenous islanders who Vijaya and his followers murdered and conquered (Dharmadasa 123).

At a time when Sinhala poetry was almost exclusively written in the *sivpada* meter, *Wawuluwa* comprised 551 quatrains set to a variety of Sinhala poetic meters. Tennakoon particularly favoured non-rhyming *gi* meters, i.e., quatrains with uneven amounts of *matra* (Ganevatte 10) that were common in classical period (12-17th century) Sinhala poems like *Sasadavata*, *Muvadevda*, and *Kavsilumina*. *Hela Havula* members favoured the linguistic register of this era and sought to model 20th century literary Sinhala on its grammar, hence Tennakoon’s gravitation towards these meters. Despite a general distrust of Indian cultural forms, some of the *Hela Havula* members were also surprisingly not averse to using the *ganachandas* system of Sanskrit meters: Cumaratunga’s entire *Piya Samara* is composed in the Sanskrit *drutavilambita* meter, and Tennakoon and other *Hela Havula* members like Hubert Dissanayake used the *ganachandas* system to perpetuate the tradition of Matara poetry.⁶ Along with characteristic meter preferences, *Hela Havula* members made their poetry books akin to the linguistic register they sought to standardize: challenging for the common reader. This is evident in the extended commentaries appended to *Hela Havula* works of poetry. Such detailed linguistic and hermeneutic exegesis⁷ became standard fare in works of the *Hela Havula* poets because their poems used an arcane lexicon and commented on myths, current events, and biographical details (as in Cumaratunga’s *Piya Samara*) through slight allusions that absolutely required explanation. The Colombo Poets, by contrast, never appended commentaries to their poems because their poetry could be commonly understood.

Cumaratunga has explained that Tennakoon coined the word “Wawuluwa” (“Batese,” or Bat Language) by appending the suffix “-uva,” found in the words *heluva* or *eluva* (“pure Sinhala”) onto the Sinhala word for “bat” (*wawula*), denoting “language of the bats” (“Wiwisuma” 41). As the Geiger Affair (discussed below) will make clear, Bat Language is a symbol for the Sinhala language. The poem revolves around a discussion between a male bat, *Wawula*, and a female drongo bird, *Kävidiya*.⁸ Both have long Sinhalese ancestry reaching back to ancient tribes in India and Sri Lanka. The two meet in the evening when *Kävidiya*’s husband is late to come home (stanzas 1–21). *Kävidiya* tells *Wawula* about her distinguished family lineage (stanzas 22–45). *Wawula* reveals that his ancestor lived in the castle garden of Sita’s father (Sita is the heroine of the

⁶ I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for bringing this to my attention.

⁷ *Hela Havula* member Jayanta Weerasekera appended Tennakoon’s *Wawuluwa* with an extended commentary and three years earlier, he had published a similar one for Cumaratunga’s long poem, *Piya Samara* (‘Remembering Father’). Weerasekera’s commentarial format used the same categories of stanza-by-stanza analysis found in commentaries published since the literary revival of the late 19th century to facilitate comprehension of Sinhala literary works like the *Sidat Sangarava*, *Siyabas Lakara*, *Dharmapradipikava*, *Amavatura*, *Butsarana*, *Muvadevda* and *Kavsilumina*. For the *anvaya* (word order) Weerasekera put the quatrain into sentence syntax. In the *vistara* or *padyartha* (description, meaning) he explained the content. The *tippani* (gloss) followed with an analysis of challenging terms or phrases.

⁸ This *topoi* of anthropomorphic animals evokes the fable-like *Magul Käma* (‘The Wedding Feast’) and *Hin Sārāya* (‘The Subtle Attack’) that Cumaratunga had published in his newspaper *Lak Mini Pahana* in 1934 and 1935. Other *Hela Havula* poems satirically criticize society within the framework of a fable. See Jayamaha Vellala’s “Gon Maluva” (*Subasa* 9-14) and Tennakoon’s *Dā Vinaya*.

Ramayana). This ancestor was later exiled to the South of India where Rama (the hero of the *Ramayana*) and Lakshmana (Rama's brother) lived (stanzas 55–59).

As Tennakoon unravels his version of the *Ramayana* epic, he portrays the Sri Lankan characters, Ravana, and his sister, Surpanakha, in new light. In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Ravana's sister Surpanakha is an ugly woman who attempts to seduce Rama and his brother Lakshmana. After she is turned down, and attempts to kill Sita, Lakshmana cuts off her ears and nose. Conversely, in *Wawuluwa*, Surpanakha is a "beautiful" (*rumat*, stanza 61) and "friendly woman" (*yeheliyak*, stanza 64). She does not flirt with the brothers, but they break their meditation and insult her by speaking in a crude flirtatious manner (stanza 65-70). Furthermore, in the standard *Ramayana*, Ravana distracts Rama and Lakshmana, abducts Sita, takes her to Sri Lanka, and demands she marry him, whereas in *Wawuluwa*, Sita dreams of going to Sri Lanka to meet Ravana, the great king of Sri Lanka (stanza 78), and he valiantly *protects* her during her stay on the island.⁹

Wawuluwa and the Geiger Affair

The final chapter of *Wawuluwa* satirizes the government hire of Professor Wilhelm Geiger as consultant to guide the development of a government-subsidized etymological Sinhala dictionary (Kudatithi 17). Geiger was widely known in literary circles in Sri Lanka after the publication of his *A Grammar of the Sinhala Language* (1938) (released a year prior to Tennakoon's *Wawuluwa*) and had authored two very influential studies in 1896 and 1897 devoted to the etymologies of roughly two thousand Sinhala words. The majority of the Sinhalese literati accepted his argument in favour of the Indo-Aryan origins of the Sinhalese language (de Silva 29). Under the supervision of Geiger and the editor in chief Sir D.B. Jayatilake, the Royal Asiatic Society launched the dictionary project in 1926. Criticized for its snail-paced progress, part one of the first volume appeared in 1935.

By 1941, the office had only completed the first six parts of the first volume, prompting Cumaratunga to publish a public letter that year in *The Helio* (the English-language journal of the *Hela Havula*), volunteering his services to complete the dictionary in two years (2). Cumaratunga was frustrated that the project was put under the guidance of Geiger, a foreign scholar whom he felt sorely lacked in Sinhala fluency. Venting his frustration, Cumaratunga authored thirteen sardonic letters of criticism, each published in both Sinhala and English, on Geiger's *A Grammar of the Sinhala Language*. For example, in the ninth criticism he attacked the credibility of Geiger's work, and the new field of comparative philology:

To Prof. Geiger ta [ē] and fya [h ē] means 'he' 'she' or 'it.' This must indeed have come as a result of some mysterious and rigid process of highly 'scientific' research. ta and fya in Sinhala is equal to 'she' in English! It will be ridiculous to argue to the contrary. One who knows the Sinhala language will require no argument at all to be convinced that it is absolutely untrue to say that ta and fya means 'she', and those whose limited knowledge of Sinhalese requires the thick cover "Comparative Philology" to protect it from the atmosphere, will never come out of their fortified shelter to

⁹ See Tennakoon 1939: stanzas 110-124, and Weerasekera's commentary pg. 235-238. Cumaratunga had written a similar heroic portrayal of Ravana six years earlier in book 4 of *Shikshamargaya* (11-14).

face any kind of argument. ("Professor Wilhelm Geiger's" 155)

In addition to these criticisms, Cumaratunga authored three "Open Appeals" in the English-language, in the *Hela Havula* journal *Subasa* to Sir D.B. Jayatilake, C.H. Collins, the chairman of the dictionary managing committee, and C.W.W. Kannangara, the minister of education. In his appeal to the chairman, he wrote:

Professor Geiger, the Great Authority of the Dictionary, does not know Sinhalese. His great Grammar, produced with the help of Mr. Julius de Lanerolle, clearly shows how lamentably defective his knowledge of Comparative Philology is so far at least as it deals with the Sinhalese language. A Dictionary compiled under the direction of such a doubtful authority can hardly be satisfactory however long may be the period it takes to materialize. To one who is already well-versed in the language, who needs not run from this end to the other end of the island to learn the etymology of one small word, who need not make a forced display of his erudition by coming out in the public over and over again with the etymology of a single word, that too unearthed by someone else, two years is quite ample to complete the most comprehensive Sinhalese Dictionary. ("An Open Appeal" 289-290)

Although Cumaratunga had published two structural linguistic grammars of the Sinhala language, *Vyakarana Vivaranaya* ('Exposition on Sinhala Grammar') (1938) and *Kriya Vivaranaya* ('Exposition on the Sinhala Verb') (1939), the dictionary project turned down his offer to complete the project. It seems that they deemed his belief foolish that Sinhala was as old as Sanskrit. I say this based on a small booklet written by the University of Ceylon linguist M.W.S. de Silva, entitled *Sinhalese and Other Island Language in South Asia* (1979): de Silva praised Cumaratunga's *Vyakarana Vivaranaya*,¹⁰ but he mentions Cumaratunga indirectly in this manner: "Some purists who upheld that Sinhalese was at least as old as Sanskrit if not older (rather than derived from it) had little patience with Geiger as was seen in the local press three decades ago...[the purists] have not shaken the basis of Geiger's observations one little bit" (29).

Turning back to *Wawuluwa* with these events in mind, it becomes evident that the character of the bat, *Wawula*, was a satirical portrayal of Sir D.B. Jayatilake and other members of the dictionary project who supported hiring a foreigner over a native scholar. As Jayantha Weerasekera's commentary for *Wawuluwa* in stanzas 513-514 disclose: "These two stanzas reveal a surprising character trait of *Wawula*. He doesn't wish for his neighbours' help as long as he is

¹⁰ De Silva writes: "The only native grammar of any significance which does not follow the *Sidat Sangarava* tradition is Kumaranatunga [Cumaratunga] (1938). Kumaranatunga's descriptions of Sinhalese phonology and morphology have some similarities to similar descriptions within the American structuralist model despite the fact that Kumaranatunga has had no training in any school of modern linguistics" (33). An anonymous reviewer of this article has suggested that Cumaratunga's structuralist affinities may be due to his knowledge of Sanskrit grammar that operates according to such principles.

alive. However talented they are, he does not like to consult them. But he does not mind taking assistance from people who come from far away” (354-55). Referring to his own exclusion from the project, Cumaratunga echoed this sentiment in his introduction to *Wawuluwa*:

Kavidiya inquires about *Wawula's* journey to Bintenne: “Why Bintenne? Can’t you learn about your own language from your own people?” No, no. *Wawula* likes to get help from foreigners much more than from his fellow countrymen... Should not the fact that local scholars are willing to give help from the bottom of their hearts influence the bat to accept their offers? Alas, *Wawula* likes to worship foreigners and would rather die than seek assistance from local scholars. (“*Wiwisuma*” 44-45)

Wawuluwa stanzas 466-469 take a jab at academic discourse about the Sinhala language written by foreign scholars like Geiger:

Chapter 27: වවුලු බස් සකැසුම [The Arrangement of the Batese Dictionary]

සසුන රක්වන්නට
මුළු දෙවන ලද සබයෙන්
සිදු වුණේ නම් වවුලුව
සකස් කරුමැර රැඹීමෙකි.

[*Wawula* said: The assembly who had gathered to protect the Buddhist order ended up commencing the compilation of the Batese dictionary!]

එ සබේ සියල්ලෝ
විමසා බලා වවුලුව
පිළියම් යෙදීමට නිසි
පවරුලු හ මා හට

[Everyone in the group examined the state of Batese and then entrusted the job of remedying the language to me.]

එ හෙයින් වවුලුවේ
සියලු පත් පොත් සමඟින්
උගතුන් එක් තැනකට
මුළු ගැන්වීම් පසු දිනැ.

[Therefore, on the following day I brought together all the Batese books and all the scholars of those books.]

බලන එ මැ පත් පොත්
උගතුන් වදන් විමසත්
බුරුම කටුයෙකැ මීට සේ
ම නිස දැනට බැමැවිණි (stanza 469)

[My head was like the handle of a manual drill. It turned in one direction when reading these Batese books, and it jerked in another when confronted with what scholars said about these works.]

Weerasekera’s commentary for stanza 469:

Glossary: 1. *Burumayeka mita vilasin*: “*Burumaya*” is a manual wood drilling machine. To penetrate the wood, one turns the handle of the drill in one direction and then in another. *Tennakoon* is saying that *Wawula's* head is like the

handle of the manual drill because when reading Batese books his mind and head are focused. Yet, when reading the discourse of scholars who write about these works, his head jerks in another direction [in disbelief or outrage]. (342)

With the interpretive support of Weerasekera's commentary, we learn that Tennakoon's intention was to wryly criticize the way the foreign scholarly discourse on the Sinhala language and literature, like Geiger's etymological studies, misrepresented and spread misinformation about the Sinhala language (Shrinat Ganevatte, personal communication, 9.11.2011).¹¹

Modernist Reform and Songs in the Mother Tongue

The career objectives and compositional goals of singer-songwriter Sunil Santha (1915-1981) parallel Tennakoon's opposition to the Indian epic's portrayal of Sri Lankan characters, and criticism of the dictionary office's failure to consult competent indigenous scholars. Tennakoon's *Wawuluwa* and Sunil Santha's radio song oblige us to rethink Partha Chatterjee's hypothesis that colonial-era South Asian "nationalism launches its most powerful, creative and historically significant project—to fashion a 'modern' national culture that is nevertheless not Western" (Chatterjee 6). I register a disagreement with the emphasis on intellectuals of colonized nations constructing national aesthetic forms only in opposition and in relation to Western culture. Bengali cultural nationalism and its complex relation to Western culture was the focus of Chatterjee's monograph that took Bengal to be representative of colonial nations. However, in the case of Sri Lanka, the powerful influence of North India, and the projects to disavow that influence, must factor into well-rounded discussions of cultural nationalism in South Asia. In the pages that follow, we will see how Santha's music turns Chatterjee's contention inside out; Santha *used Western musical influences to fashion a modern Sinhalese national music that was not North Indian.*

Santha's compositions typify what ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino has termed as "modernist reform." Here, local arts are reformed and re-contextualized based on "cosmopolitan" aesthetics, ethics, and worldview (16). Turino defines cosmopolitanism as objects, ideas, and cultural positions that are widely diffused throughout the world and yet are specific only to certain portions of the populations within given countries (7). He further insightfully observes that modernist reform and the global history of cultural nationalism that it accompanies, is marked by paradox: cosmopolitanism is a requirement *and* a potential threat for nation states since each must maintain a unique *local* identity on the *international* scene. And so cultural brokers must carefully present local culture: if distinctiveness is too local, groups within the state's territory could feel underrepresented and form separatist movements, threatening the unity of the nation-state (15-16). Santha's songs, very popular amongst the Sinhalese English-educated elite, were pregnant with the possibility of finding an international audience due to his use of western harmonies, instruments, and memorable melodies.¹² This

¹¹ Tennakoon has critically explored issues pertaining to the Sinhala language in other long poems like *Gamayana* (1957) (See 14th chapter) and *Bus Para* (?). I am thankful to the anonymous reviewer for bringing this to my attention.

¹² For example, Joan Eleanor Ramsbotham, daughter of the Ceylon Governor General, Herwald Ramsbotham, praised Santha's songs "Olu Pipila," "Kokile Nade" (The Cuckoo Bird's Song), and "Handa Pane" in a personal letter sent to Santha in June of 1951 (see Alavattage 28, and Vitarana *Sunil Samara* 358).

mix of local (Sinhala language) and “cosmopolitan” (Western music and instruments) satisfy the paradoxical requirements of modernist reform.



Figure 1.2: Portrait of the artist from his songbook *Mal Mihira* (1952)

Along with composing a national song genre, Santha had the additional goal of putting the Sinhalese English-educated elite back in touch with songs in their mother tongue. In the introduction to his songbook *Sunil Handa* ('Sunil's Voice') (1947) he remarked:

Those assimilated to Western food and drink, clothing, customs and habits, etc., have driven our language into the kitchen. They are ashamed to talk in our mother tongue. Apart from singing an English song in an English vocal style, there is no music of Sri Lanka they like. Some of them jokingly say “This is Sinhalese music” and start singing *pañal kavi*, *karatta kavi*, *sipada*, and *vannam* [Sinhalese folk songs]. Except for flippantly singing folk song, I find our current situation quite upsetting. This is why I brought out [my first songbook] *Ridi Walawa*. Must I say anything about the service I have rendered through the songs like “Olu Pipila,” and “Handa Pane”? Those who gagged from distaste of the Sinhala language and gave prominence to English are now happily singing these lyrics. Now they will familiarize themselves with songs in their mother tongue. This is one of the goals of my new music. (*Sunil Handa*: 4)

Santha printed two songbooks, *Sunil Santha Song Folio* (1948), and *Song of Lanka* (1950), especially for the Westernized Sinhalese elite in Colombo. Since many members of Sinhalese high society had studied Western classical music, the books notated Santha's songs in Western notation. However, instead of transliterating his songs into English script, he printed Sinhala script under the notation. Here, it is striking to note how he used western notation to

After training for a year in North Indian classical voice, sitar, orchestration, and in Tagore's own ruminative musical genre known as *rabindrasangit*, Perera decided to pursue a more rigorous study of classical music. He secured financial aid from the Ceylon government and travelled to Lucknow to focus on Hindustani voice and sitar at the prestigious Marris College of Hindustani Music.¹³ Like many Sinhalese Christians who changed their anglicized and Christian names to Sinhalese names in the mid-twentieth century, Perera adopted the Sinhala stage name of "Sunil Shanti," as evidenced in a letter posted to his younger brother in 1940 (Pranandu 17). In 1944 he scored the highest marks in the first division sitar class, completed a *Sangeeth Visharada* degree, and returned to Ceylon (see figure 1.4, a copy of the letter of recommendation he received from Marris College principal S.N Ratanjankar).

Back home, Father Moses Perera gave his nephew Joseph John a temporary place to lodge. Father Perera was a member of the *Hela Havula* or Pure Sinhala Fraternity. Father Perera introduced young Joseph to Cumaratunga's writings that criticized Sinhalese musicians who trained in North India and had no knowledge of Sinhalese music. The impressionable Joseph began to feel Indian music-cultural influence was a threat to a truly national Sri Lankan musical genre. In 1945, Perera made a final adjustment to his name, turning Sunil Shanti into "Sunil Santha."

¹³ The institution later became Bhatkhande University.

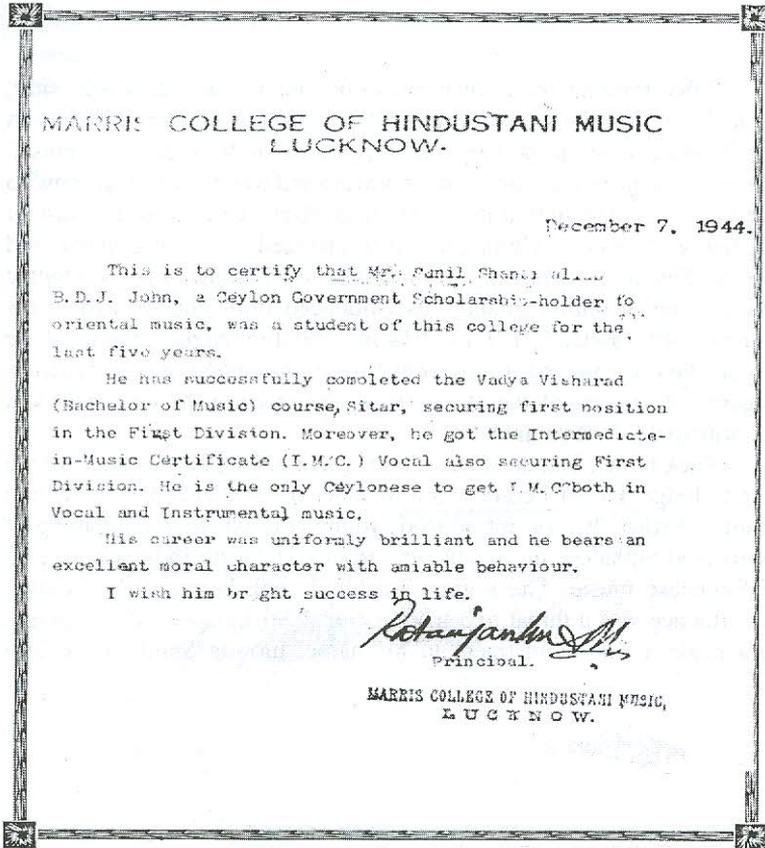


Figure 1.4: Santha's Letter of Recommendation from Sunil Sara Siri Sara 2009¹⁴

This is Santha on his experience reading the ideas of Munidasa Cumaratunga:

While in North India I transformed into a North Indian...in my dress, language, customs, ideas, etc. Even when I was back in Sri Lanka, I behaved as though I were still in North India. It was a big deal for me to forget all my Sinhalese ways and act like this. When singing Sinhala songs, I would pronounce the Sinhala words as though they were Hindi words. I considered the Hindi accenting of Sinhala words to be a great thing. In short, in every single activity I pushed my Sinhalese identity away and brought forward North Indian ways of being.

One day I read some Sinhala poetry. I read it once, twice, and a third time. I knew the verse contained an important idea and I felt myself transformed within. The stanzas that really penetrated my heart are these:

On account of my country and nation

¹⁴ I would like to acknowledge the generosity of Ivor Dennis, Sunil Santha's well-known disciple who gave me the commemorative volume that contained the photocopy of this degree, and shared additional rare documents pertaining to Sunil Santha.

If I were I to go to war and kill enemies
And lose my life thereof
Will not my glory live for a hundred years?

Were one to live confined in a stone cave
His life and name will never last
Sacrifice that life to the country and nation
Preserve your honour and remain undefeated

May I never see a Helaya (a Sinhalese person)
Two footed, but not doing any service
Working earnestly for the good of country and nation
Forget life's cravings for a moment

(1953: 4)¹⁵

He had stumbled upon these stanzas in Munidasa Cumaratunga's musical treatise *Hela Miyasiya* (Sinhala Music) (85). Inspired by Cumaratunga's patriotic poetry, he admits of an inner transformation:

I searched for other writings penned by this meritorious hand [Munidasa Cumaratunga]. Having found them, I read with great pleasure. This writer was successful in destroying all my useless ideas. I turned in a completely different direction. I felt that my "Hindustani-ness" left me and went all the way back to India for good. Today there is nothing more important than my nation, country, and language." (in Vitarana, *Sunil Samara* 23)

Santha thus espoused Cumaratunga's motto of "nation, country, and language." Earlier, the slogan of the cultural nationalist movement was "country, nation, and religion"; Cumaratunga replaced religion with *language*. As Sandagomi Coperahewa writes, "the trend of putting language before religion in constructing national identity reflects the growing importance of the language factor in Sinhala nationalism and politics in the late 1930s" ("Purifying the Sinhala Language" 27).

"Olu Pipila"

Santha's first big hit was "Olu Pipila" (The Lilies have Blossomed) for which he composed the lyric, music, and performed as the solo vocalist. In 1946, it was the first song that the Sri Lankan radio station recorded on record (D.P.M. Weerakkody 283).

Below is a translation of "Olu Pipila":

Sister, the lotus has blossomed and sways in the field, whiter than white
Sister, oh fair skinned maiden, shall I pluck them and weave a flower garland for you?
Mala, come in the water and give me your hand

¹⁵ I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for suggesting these translations.

We'll cut the flowers, weave garlands, and adorn ourselves

Sister, the unbroken chains of fish play lovingly
Sister, The *kunis* fish go jumping as if we have called them
Mala, here is the flower I picked for you, this one is yours
We'll cut the flowers, weave garlands, and adorn ourselves

Sister, I am ashamed to be defeated by your hands
Sister, don't be in such a rush, let's wade slowly in the water,
picking lotus flowers

Mala, with the whiteness of the flowers on your body, you
become more stunning
We'll cut the flowers, weave garlands, and adorn ourselves

Sister, plucking and picking, now the flowers are heavy
Sister, let's go put them around the top of the mountain
Mala, your younger brother is coming, let's go quickly
We'll cut the flowers, weave garlands, and adorn ourselves

Abandoning the North Indian influenced *sthayi-antara* form, Santha's lyric had four separate verses (the fourth was not recorded). The chorus is the last line of each stanza: "We'll cut the flowers, weave garlands, and adorn ourselves." Unlike the bulk of gramophone songs recorded in the first four decades of the twentieth century, the lyric attempts to incorporate structural elements found in Sinhala poetry.¹⁶ Just as Colombo poetry featured quatrains with rhyme at the end of each line, Santha hints at this by repeating the words "Nango" ('Oh sister') and "mala." (In the third line "Mala" refers to the girl's proper name and in the fourth line it means flower garlands). Furthermore, the stanzas' regular syllabic structure of 26, 26, 24, and 26 also gestures towards the regular structures of Sinhala metered poetry.

Narrated in the first person point of view of a young male who courts a girl, Mala, near a village pond, the song evokes a lush village scenario through the usage of definite articles (the unbroken chains of fish, the white lotus swaying in the field). The honorific vocative second person pronoun of "nango" (Oh sister!) signals the existence of another participant to whom the commands are addressed (Semino 40). In 1946, romantic themes had only recently been introduced into Sinhala song. In the early decades of the twentieth century, songs were predominantly Buddhist, patriotic, and edificatory (Ariyaratne *Ananda Samarakoon Adhyanayaya* 92). Sunil Ariyaratne has credited Ananda Samarakone's "Ennada Manike" (Shall I Come My Precious?), recorded two years earlier in 1944, as a pioneering attempt to make romance a theme for an original Sinhala song. Given the popularity of Samarakone's "Ennada Manike," it is likely that it influenced Santha's choice of theme for "Olu Pipila." We might consider "Ennada Manike" as an intertext in "Olu Pipila:" both songs are set in a Sri Lankan village and narrate a boy's attempts to woo a girl by picking flowers. Thus, Santha "simultaneously affirms his belonging" to Samarakone's song form but simultaneously "distinguishes himself within it" (Neal 42).

¹⁶ The same can be said for the songs of Ananda Samarakone. See Ariyaratne 1988.

“Lanka, Lanka, Pembara Lanka”

Santha recorded “Lanka, Lanka, Pembara Lanka” (Lanka, Lanka, Lovely Lanka) shortly after “Olu Pipilla.” It used a similar orchestral arrangement and simple I IV V harmonic patterns. The song was his first collaboration with the *Hela Havula* poet Ariesen Ahubudu, who wrote the lyric. Ariyaratne has revealed that they initially met at a *Hela Havula* meeting in the coastal village of Unawatuna in Galle district (“Ahubudu saha” 14). Composed nearly one year prior to political independence, the patriotic song equates Sri Lankan cultural history with Sinhalese cultural history (Wijesinghe 81). It was also new for a radio song to address the country as a mother or princess, with the respectful second person pronoun, “oba” (Lokubandara 326).

I am led to believe this song was recorded at the same session as “Olu Pipila” due to the exact same instrumentation of acoustic guitar, Hawaiian slide guitar, bamboo flute, a few violins, and a similar quality of voice produced from the particular microphone used at the time. This is the instrumental introduction:

The musical score is written in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The first system consists of three staves: the top staff is for Hawaiian Slide Guitar, the middle staff is for Bamboo Flute, and the bottom staff is for Acoustic Guitar (A. Gtr.). The second system consists of two staves: the top staff is for Violins and the bottom staff is for Slide Guitar (Slid. Gtr.). The Acoustic Guitar part provides a steady accompaniment of chords, while the Slide Guitar and Violins play melodic lines. The Bamboo Flute part is a melodic line that weaves between the other instruments.

English Translation:

Chorus:

Lanka, Lanka, Lovely Lanka
 We will make thee pleased, Lanka
 Sacrificing our lives we adorn thee
 We will care for you, Lanka

The second stanza cites Cumaratunga as one of the great sages of the country:

Lanka, home to kings Bali Taru, Ravana, Gamunu, and
 Vijayabahu
 Lanka, land of sages Pulatissi, Gurulugomi, Totagamuve, and
Cumaratunga

Lanka, home to poets like Parakramabahu, a Lord Sakra of poetry
When we protect you, even the heat of a dragon¹⁷ is like the cold
streams at Siri Pada

Lanka, land of rivers Mahavali, Kalu, Kalaniya, and Walawe,
flowing in four directions
Lanka, the Samanola, Kirigala, and Pidurutala are the peaks of
your hair
Lanka, in your valleys you cradle tea, rubber, and paddy fields

Lanka, if you expand into the ocean we will jump
We will not allow outsiders to meddle with your affairs
If they come we will chase them into the deep blue sea
We will sing your name in land and water and all places

Being pierced by bullets [for you feel soft] like petals of a flower
We will adorn you with necklaces of pearls
We will adorn you with garlands of flowers from creepers
We will please you by serving the finest curd and treacle
In the end our bodies will be embraced by your soil

Though “Olu Pipila” and “Lanka, Lanka, Pembara Lanka” share similar musical features, the text worlds are strikingly different. If “Lanka, Lanka, Pembara Lanka” is primarily a descriptive text, “Olu Pipila” is a narrative text. “Olu Pipila” is sung by a first person singular male narrator to a girl he is attracted to. Contrarily, the first person plural “we” sing “Lanka, Lanka Pembara Lanka.” Songs with a “we” character are effective strategies for enhancing nationalist feelings; the song interpellates (addresses and thereby instantiates) all “Sri Lankans” though only mentions legendary Sinhalese figures. The dominant modality of the song is what Marie-Laure Ryan calls the “obligation world”:

The obligation world...is a system of commitments and prohibitions defined by social rules and moral principles. While the social rules are issued by an external authority, the moral principles may be defined by the characters themselves. These regulations specify actions as allowed (i.e., possible), obligatory (necessary), and prohibited (impossible). A person or character’s obligation world is satisfied in the Textual Actual World if all the obligations have been fulfilled and none of the interdictions transgressed (Ryan 116).

“Lanka, Lanka, Pembara Lanka” is about the moral imperative to praise, beautify, protect, and die for the country. The song reaches its lyrical climax in the fourth stanza where the future tense dominates; “we” promise to beautify the nation and die on her soil. In contrast to the obligation modality of “Lanka, Lanka,

¹⁷ The Sinhala for this phrase is “oba rakunot, lokumbuvata apa hata.” According to Lokubandara (1989) the word lokumbuwa refers to a dragon (makara). My translation follows his interpretation.

Pembara Lanka,” the “wish world” takes centre stage in “Olu Pipila.” Ryan describes the wish world like this:

The wish-world of characters is defined over propositions involving the axiological predicates good, bad, and neutral. The first of these predicates corresponds to Todorov’s optative mode. While moral laws define goodness and badness relative to the community, the law of desire defines these predicates relatively to the individual...A desired state is typically the possession of a certain object. A desired action is an intrinsically rewarding activity such as making love, eating, or playing games. (Ryan 117)

The narrator in “Olu Pipila” desires to take the girl’s hand, and to play with her in the pond away from the eyes of her family.

Literary Grammar in Lyrics

Inspired by Munidasa Cumaratunga’s clarion call for a more grammatically “correct” Sinhala, Santha’s lyrics like “Olu Pipila” employed subject-object agreement found in classical literary Sinhala. Cumaratunga had believed that standardizing the grammar of Sinhala was an essential requirement for a *shishhta* or “cultured” society. Coperahewa has observed that Cumaratunga “used metaphors of law and society to define the relationship of grammar to language” (“Purifying the Sinhala Language” 869). In his preface to his 1938 *Vyakarana Vivaranaya* (‘An Exposition on Sinhala Grammar’), Cumaratunga wrote, “Just like a society without laws, a language without laws would plunge into confusion. The Sinhala language is facing disaster. A course of action to prevent this is immediately called for...[A standardized] grammar is utterly necessary for a cultured society” (1).

Taking these campaigns to heart, in 1946, Santha published *Hela Ridi Walawa* (‘The Hela Silver Cloud’). It was a book of lyrics and notations of sixteen songs like “Olu Pipila” and “Handa Pane” (‘In the Moonlight’).¹⁸ In “Olu Pipila” Santha used the rare future tense, neuter/masculine plural suffix, –oä (-), for conjugating the verb root ‘yana’ (go) into ‘yanno.’¹⁹

Ex. 1, from “Olu Pipila” (1946):

කුනිස්සේ උඩ පැන පැන යන්නේ අප කැඳවා නංගේ
Kunissō uda pānā pānā **yannō** apa kändavā nangō
Sister, the kunisso fish go jumping [as if] inviting us [to do so]

Another rare future tense conjugation is found in *Handa Pane*:

Ex. 2, from “Handa Pane” (1947):
මගෙ පොඩි නංගී කීරි ඉල්ලා

¹⁸ The following analysis is indebted to Alavattage (34-40) and Vitarana (“Pasuvadana” 104-10). Alavattage commends Santha for his lyrics’ literary grammar, lack of many Sanskrit words, Hela-Havula lexicon, and encyclopaedic references to forgotten aspects of village life. Vitarana praises Santha’s poetic imagination as expressed through metaphors, similes, and *vyangartha* (allusion, suggestion).

¹⁹ See Gair and Karunatilake 244-245 on future tense conjugation in literary Sinhala.

mage podI nangī kiri illā
My little sister, requesting for some milk

දෝත නගා මහ ඉහළ බලා
dōta nangā maha ihāla balā
raises her hands way up high

අම්බිලියෝ' කියමින් නැළැවෙන්නී
ambilyō kiyamin **nālāvennī**
She lulls herself singing "Oh Moon!"

බැබැලෙන හඳ පානේ
bābālena handa panē
In the glowing moonlight

Here Santha employed the feminine future tense suffix, -ī (-B), for conjugating the root *nāla-* (to be lulled) into *nālāvennī*. As with the previous example, this is a literary form that lyricists were not using in gramophone or radio songs. In addition, as was customary for the *Hela Havula* poets, he adds an *ä-karaya* letter in words like *pānā pānā nālāvennī* and *bābālena*, which give the lyrics a Hela-Sinhala touch.

Lack of Indian Music Influence

Cumaratunga's language ideologies also made a tremendous impact on Santha's musical style; as Cumaratunga sought to remove North Indian (read: Sanskrit) influence in the Sinhala language, Santha became disillusioned with strong North Indian music influence in Sinhala recorded song.²⁰ Santha lashed out against musicians who blindly followed Hindustani music, contemptuously labelling them *Sinhalastānkārayo*, ("The 'Sinhalaстан' [Sinhalese + Hindustan] crowd"):

There is a reason why national music and national music education is bitter like a poisonous *kaduru* nut for the *Sinhalastan* crowd. There is a reason why everyone who trains in Indian classical music transforms completely into a Hindustani person and feels that our national music should be Hindustani music. Such people have no affection, consideration, or love for their country, nation, or language. (Santha *Deshiya Sangitaya* in *Vitarana Sunil Samara* 25)

Despite studying classical Indian vocal music and scoring the highest marks in the first division sitar class at Bhatkande, there is a marked absence of Indian music ornamentation in Santha's compositions and vocal style. Sunil Ariyaratne has written:

Sunil Santha's voice was trained from childhood in Catholic music of the Church...His voice sounded new to Sinhala music connoisseurs. It was uniquely different from vocalists

²⁰ That said, Santha has composed music in Indian ragas. For instance, his "Rama Vālapilla" (Rama's Lament) is composed in Bhairavi raga (Nishoka Sandaruwan: Personal Communication, 1.3.2012).

like Sadiris de Silva, H. W. Rupasinghe, Don Manis Pattiarachche, N. Romlas de Silva, even Ananda Samarakone. These musicians who trained in North India used all the ornamentations like *kan swara* and *meend* found in Hindustani classical music...Sunil Santha rarely used these ornamentations. He moved straight from note to note. He also pronounced the words better than all the other Sinhalese musicians who trained in North India. (*Shri Lankawe Kadayam Sangitaya* 18-19)

In a similar vein, D.P.M Weerakkody has written:

Sunil Santha was influenced not only by Cumaratunga's linguistic style and philosophy but also by his views on music. Although at a later date Santha criticized the limitations of the *Hela Miyasiya*, initially it appears to have made some impact on him. According to Jayantha Aravinda...this impact explains the simplicity of many of Sunil Santha's melodies and the predominance of natural [unornamented] notes in them. (287)

Santha predominantly used the major scale and arranged an upright bass and acoustic guitar to outline harmonic patterns dealing mostly with I, IV, and V chords. In the arrangement of "Olu Pipila" we hear an uncommon amplified Hawaiian slide guitar. Also, Santha played the acoustic guitar in a "country western" style, by plucking the bass string on the beat and strumming the chord on the offbeat. He orchestrated melodic lines to be doubled in octaves or sixths through various combinations of violins, flute, and slide guitar. Professor Ranjit Pranandu at the University of the Visual and Performing Arts has conjectured that Santha absorbed the influence of American country western music of the 1930s and 40s broadcast by Radio Ceylon (Personal Communication: February 2012).

Criticisms of Ancient Indian Musical Influence

The introductions found in Santha's songbooks, authored by Santha and other *Hela Havula* members, are marked with *Hela Havula* language and rhetoric. For example, Santha uses various "purist" words coined by Cumaratunga, like *redev pola* (radio) and *saru sāriya* (notation) (*Hela Ridi Walawa*: xiii). In the songbook *Hela Ridi Walawa*, Santha set two poems from Cumaratunga's musical treatise *Hela Miyasiya* to music. Santha's songbooks also contain songs that praise and commemorate Cumaratunga's legacy; the songbook *Guvan Totilla* (1948) featured Amarasiri Gunavadu's "Cumaratungu Samaru Giya" ('Cumaratunga Commemoration Song') and the songbook *Mal Mihira* (1952) featured the song "Cumaratungu Agayum Giya" ('A Song Cherishing Cumaratunga') written by Ariesen Ahubudu. There are also songs of *Hela Havula* rhetoric, like Hubert Dissanayake's *Ma Desa, Rasa, Basa* ('My Country, Nation, and Language') (*Guvan Totilla* 21).

Members of the *Hela Havula* like Rapiyel Tennakoon, Jayantha Weerasekera, and Ariesen Ahubudu authored introductions to Sunil Santha's songbooks. Tennakoon's nearly impenetrable (because of a dense purist Sinhala

dialect) essay in *Hela Ridi Walawa* extended Cumaratunga's *Hela Miyasiya* criticisms of North Indian cultural influence, to a criticism of ancient Indian influence on Sinhalese music history.

India, like Dikpitiya,²¹ pretends they are going to help us get to the other side of this samsaric ocean of sadness but they are really the biggest obstacle, curse, and evil influence. The sounds of the *pas anga turu* [the five types of instruments] pierce our ears and we praise it, saying *sadu sadu* [amen, amen]. Then the seventh of the eight precepts kills off our music even more, making it stale. The world of the pious Helas, who were blindly following Indian culture, became bitter. The pious Helas began to view music as something bad. (ix)

Comparing India to a cunning character found in the Jataka tales, Tennakoon contends that when Theravada Buddhism came to Sri Lanka from the Indian subcontinent in the third century BC, it influenced how Sinhalese Buddhists conceived of music. The religious doctrine required novice monks to accept ten precepts, in which the seventh read: "I undertake the precept to refrain from dancing, singing, instrumental music, and seeing entertainment." Since music was one of the five sensual pleasures that lead to craving and attachment, it was considered a hindrance to the goal of emancipation from the realm of *samsara* (Seneviratna *Traditional Dance* 15). For Tennakoon, this was an unwelcome Indian influence that soured the indigenous Hela music tradition.

Furthermore, Tennakoon cryptically references the *pas anga turu*, the five ancient instrument types according to Pali commentaries. A sixth century Pali commentary on the Mahavamsa entitled the *Vamsathappakāsini*, whose authorship is unknown, shows the influence of the Sanskrit [read: Indian] instrument classification scheme of *ghana* (idiophone), *avanaddha* (membranophone), *susira* (aerophone), and *tat* (chordophone). Like the influence of the precept forbidding music, Tennakoon felt that this instrument classification scheme was an unwanted foreign Indian influence that contributed to the destruction of the indigenous Hela musical tradition.

The Ratanjankar Controversy

We know Santha knew of the Geiger controversy that Tennakoon lampooned in the final chapter of *Wawuluwa* as evident in these quotes:

I do not believe that we should wish for a foreigner to come to Sri Lanka to advise us on how to create a national music just because we brought a German to advise us on the Sinhala language. (Santha, *Lankadipa* May 5, 1952)

Not only me, what happened to the artist Solias Mendis? In this country there is no space given to those who do good work. Now see, the dictionary...Cumaratunga Sir said, "I'll finish the whole thing in two years, just hand it over." Did

²¹ Dikpitiya is a character in the *Ummagga Jataka* tale. A man, Kalugola and his wife cannot cross a river because they mistakenly fear it is too deep and filled with crocodiles. The cunning Dikpitiya takes the woman on his shoulders and when he gets to the middle of the river goes on his knees pretending the water is deep to fool Kalugola. He then persuades the woman to abandon her husband.

they entrust the project to him? Now how many years have passed? They still have not finished the *a-yanna* [the first letter of the Sinhala alphabet] section...So it is not only me. (Santha in a 1966 interview, Senaratne 107)

In April of 1952, when Radio Ceylon brought the North Indian musician and scholar, S.N. Ratanjankar (Santha's former teacher at the Marris College), to grade Sinhalese musicians for the second time,²² and to advise the station on creating a national music, Santha boycotted the auditions and quit his post as an A-grade musician. He wrote in protest to the *Lankadipa* newspaper and published a small booklet, *Deshiya Sangitaya* ('National Music') in March of 1953 that lashed out against the Ratanjankar examination and report. To the newspaper he wrote, "There are those in the Sinhala department of the radio station who will surely protect Ratanjankar's project to nourish Indian music. Those who were just beginning to form a national music will probably be considered like weeds" (April 23, *Lankadipa*). Just like Munidasa Cumaratunga and Rapiyel Tennakoon who criticized the solicitation of Wilhelm Geiger's consultation on the Sinhala dictionary project, Sunil Santha felt it a disgrace that the radio station would ask Ratanjankar to be the arbiter of Sri Lankan national music.

In conclusion, this article has revealed how Tennakoon's *Wawuluwa* and Sunil Santha's art song problematise Partha Chatterjee's hypothesis that anti-colonial nationalism is a project to fashion a 'modern' national culture that is not Western. In colonial Ceylon, the poet Rapiyel Tennakoon and songwriter Sunil Santha did not creatively resist Western imperialism; they resisted the powerful influence of North India. Santha's music and Tennakoon's *Wawuluwa*, then, run contrary to Chatterjee's contention; Santha used Western musical influences to fashion a modern Sinhalese national music that was *not* North Indian while Tennakoon's *Wawuluwa* sought to refashion a modern Sinhalese *Ramayana* in reaction to the Indian version.

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²² His first visit was in 1949. That year Ratanjankar bestowed an A-grade on five musicians: Lionel Edirisinghe, Ananda Samarakone, Deva Surya Sena, Sunil Santha, and S. Amarasinghe (Colombage 83).

- වග්විද්‍යාත්මක අධ්‍යයනයක් (Visi vana Siyavase Sinhala Bhasha Vyavaharaya: Samajavagvidyatmaka Adhyayanakak). Colombo: S. Godage and Brothers, 2010.
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