

**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.<sup>1</sup> 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).<sup>2</sup> He also was a devoted student of Cumaratunga's manual for composing Sinhala metered poetry, *Virit Vākiya* ('Statement on [Sinhala poetic] Meters') (1938).<sup>3</sup> 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).<sup>4</sup> 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.

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<sup>2</sup> 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 (13-17<sup>th</sup> century) Sinhala and they tried to "purge" the Sinhala lexicon of Sanskrit influence.

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

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

