



# Sri Lankan drums: Pulsating Beat of Centuries



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**S**ri Lankan culture is beautifully bestowed with art, music, literature and religious heritage. Music is a universal language that has the mesmerising power to connect people. Sri Lanka has its distinct musical melodies and beats.

It is interesting to note that most of the instruments, especially the drums are strongly affiliated with religious ceremonies and rituals, found within Buddhism and Hinduism. The great chronicle *Mahavamsa* classifies the traditional musical instruments of the island under a system recognised as *pancaturya nada* (*panca* means fivefold). I have been told the first two refer to drums: *ata* (single-headed drums) and *vitata* (double-headed drums). The connection between the musician and their instrument still remains individualised and pervasively strong, perhaps influenced by decades of drum performing.

Within this traditional music, three distinct traditions are identified as Up-Country (Kandy or *uda rata*), Low-Country (*pahatha rata*) and Sabaragamuwa, according to the geographical terrains. These three musical domains proudly display their own identifying instruments: the *gata beraya* (*beraya* means drum) which represents the Up-Country tradition, the *yak beraya* which represents the Low-Country, and the *davula* which is associated with the Sabaragamuwa tradition. Another drum called the *tammattama* has been embraced commonly in all three regions.

My first visual acquaintance with these drums was at temples and kovils. In my opinion, unlike Western drums which are more modern and thrive on electric sound systems, our traditional drums have a deep soul. It is not just the drum but the connection of the craftsmen making them, using skills passed down from the time of our ancient kings. There are still a few villages where these talented men work silently, creating drums that powerfully unleash beats. The preferred wood, chosen by rural drum makers for the body of the drum, is from trees with hard cores such as *ahala*, *milla*, *kohomba*, *jack* and *kitihul*. As per local craftsmen's traditional thinking, for drum making, trees growing near a temple or trees brought down by lightning are used. It was told that trees growing adjacent to cemeteries are not used by rural drum makers, no matter how good the quality of the wood is.

Most visiting tourists will observe various kinds of local drums at the flamboyant Buddhist *perahera* processions, which serve as a platform to showcase regional dance and drums - apart from the primary veneration of the noble Buddha. The Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic in Kandy is one place where the *hevisi* performance can be seen and appreciated amidst cool winds.

Drums are played at centuries-old rituals. Some of the common rituals are as follows. The term *bali* refers to an offering of a gift or oblation. The *bali* ritual stems from a belief in the benevolent and malevolent influences of the nine planetary deities on humans. During this ritual, the planetary deities are pacified in order to ward off their evil influences. *Thovil* rituals are identified as rituals carried out to ward off evil influences inflicted by demons. Traditionally, *thovil* rituals are exorcism rites. The third traditional segment of rituals, *madu* - are communal rituals carried out in honour of the deities. These rituals intend to bring blessings to the community.

Within the diverse spectrum of Sri Lankan beats, the most commonly used drums are the *gata beraya*, *yak beraya*, *davula*, *tammattama*, *uddakkiya* and *rabana*. The *gata beraya* proudly represents the Up Country drumming tradition and is a double-headed barrel-shaped drum. The two drum-heads are covered with different skins. Cow skin is used for the drumhead which produces a bass sound while the other side is covered with goatskin. Another beautiful drum seen at the *perahera* processions is the *davula* representing the Sabaragamuwa region of Sri Lanka. This drum is

cylindrical, and played with a specially carved stick (*kaddippuva*) on one side and using the hand on the other side.

The *yak beraya* (demon drum) is the primary instrument representing the Low-Country tradition of drumming. The *yak beraya* is also known as the *devol beraya* (named after the ritual *devol maduwa*), *ruhunu beraya* (after a kingdom of the South called Ruhunu), and as the *pahatarata beraya* (Low-Country drum). The *yak beraya* is used in several secular performance contexts: Buddhist weddings, parades that welcome dignitaries and performances aimed at impressing tourists.

The *tammattama* drums consist of a pair of vessel-shaped kettle drums, played using a pair of special cane sticks with curved, circular ends. The drummer who plays this seems to display lots of energy when playing - this is my personal observation. Two other lesser appreciated Sri Lankan drums are the *uddakkiya*, which is an hourglass-shaped drum and the *rabana*, which is a frame drum. The *rabana* is popular in music videos. The bigger *rabana* is always part of the April New Year celebrations, where it is played using both hands. This is a fun spectacle to watch, especially, if the drummers are beautiful young women in their flower design printed traditional clothes. During rituals and temple events, a conch shell (*hak gediya*) and a small hand-held bell (*mini gediya*) are also used to enhance the traditional drum beats. The robust blowing of the *hak gediya* (conch shell) often accompanies

the *magul bera* (auspicious drumming) element and is depicted as releasing a positive aura or blessing. In rituals, there is a connection between the drummer and the dancer. They manifest their art as a glorious team.

Making drums is a skill perfected with pious patience. After the body of the instrument is carved out, it is kept under flowing water for a few days. It is subsequently taken out and dried in the shade. A paste of heated resin is carefully coated on the inside of the drum. An oral tradition says that the *gata beraya* and the *yak beraya* were believed to be left uncoloured. However, the *davula*, *tammattama*, *uddakkiya* and *rabana* are coloured with natural paints.

Cow and goatskins require preparation by instrument makers. The fleshy side of the skin is coated with ash, to stop it from decomposing. The skin is then spread on a flat surface, thoroughly stretched held by pegs. The stretched skin is later dried under the sun. The *varapata* (straps on the drum) are cut to around a quarter of an inch in width from dried cowhide. These sturdy straps hold the two outer skins of the drum together. The tuning of the drum is generally done using the palm.

In the Tamil-Hindu rituals, drums are played at kovil festivals such as the world-famous Nallur Kandaswamy Kovil festival in Jaffna. *Parai melam* (a double-headed cylindrical drum played with two sticks) music occupies a significant position in the Jaffna Tamil domain of rituals. *Parai melam* is identified as an ancient Tamil music instrument, which dates back to the Sangam period. The *parai* drum was used as effective communication to announce important messages to people; it was also played at weddings, rituals, and kovils.

The *mridangam* is played in Tamil cultural settings, within an ensemble. The *thavil* is a large drum of Indian origin, but now used widely in Sri Lankan kovil festivals. The Sinhalese and Tamil drummers have a rich musical heritage from centuries ago. I have spoken to some of these men and they claim that they are not duly recognised as cultural musicians. Some are not keen to take part in commercialised performances, but oblige due to economic needs at home. Many wanted their children to learn and get better jobs, thus leaving a void for traditional drummers in the future.

We must appreciate our traditional drummers and preserve their skills. Let's hope our nation's traditional drums will beat and resonate with Sri Lankan pride for centuries to come.

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