

SRI LANKAN BAILA

May 1, 2018, 8:57 pm



By Dr Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya

The extraordinary love of the Portuguese for music is epitomised at El Ksar el Kabir in Morocco, 1578, where 10,000 guitars lay on the battlefield, near the dead Portuguese soldiers. The Portuguese took guns and guitars to battlefields! Is it surprising that the Portuguese presence is vibrant through Sri Lankan popular music – Baila?

Baila is a ballad in which the poetry is of paramount importance. A ballad is a short poem suitable for singing which was originally intended to accompany a dance. The etymology of ballad is ballare (late Latin/Italian) meaning 'to dance'. Today the Portuguese word bailar meaning 'to dance' is used in the context of a Ball; dançar means 'to dance'. Meanings of words change over time and place. The association of the word Baila with dance predominantly undervalues its balladic significance. Music, song and dance are closely knit forms of art and unsurprisingly, Baila refers to music, song and dance in Sri Lanka. This

article concerns Baila in Sri Lanka. It does not concern Baila in South America or Europe where Latin languages prevail.

Sri Lanka's Portuguese era is generally considered to have begun in 1505 when a ship sailing to the Maldives, captained by Lourenço de Almeida, was windswept to Galle. The encounter with the first European power is taken to have ended in 1658 with the fall of Jaffna and Mannar. Throughout Portuguese presence, the Kandyan kingdom remained under Sri Lankan rule, excepting for Batticaloa and Trincomalee which came under Portuguese domination from only the first half of the seventeenth century. The actual period of Portuguese domination in Sri Lanka was no more than 60 years. Yet, the Portuguese legacy, particularly the intangible heritage, has been remarkably durable in underscoring the 1540 prediction of the Portuguese chronicler, João de Barros:

'The Portuguese arms and pillars placed in Africa and in Asia, and in countless isles beyond the bounds of three continents, are material objects, that would be destroyed over time but time would not destroy the religion, customs and language that the Portuguese implanted in those lands' [my translation].

In 1974, the Swasangeetha ('Our Songs') programme sponsored by the Associated Motorways Group of Companies (Colombo), televised by Rupavahini in Sri Lanka, reported Batticaloa Burgher (Sri Lankans with European ancestry) music and songs as Kaffrinha and their dance as Baila. But the dances of the Batticaloa Burghers are Kaffrinha and Lancers. The confusion between Kaffrinha and Baila continues to-date. A few years later, in 1976, the Catholic Burgher Union (Batticaloa) compiled a booklet of cantigas (songs) with religious and secular themes. Batticaloa ballads are linked to Romances, one of the oldest and most important genres of Portuguese sung poetry which survives only in northern Portugal, Trás-os-Montes, and the Atlantic archipelago which belongs to Portugal, Azores, and also in northeastern Brazil. When the BBC World Routes team visited Batticaloa, in September 2011, they were astonished to hear these centuries-old musical traditions. Vivid descriptions by Dr. Lucy Duran, an ethnomusicologist at the University of London, are on the BBC website. A few Batticaloa songs are linked to Sinhala Bailas. Bailas are also sung in Tamil, English, Sri Lanka Malay and Sri Lanka Portuguese. The Sinhala Baila, Mala Giravī ('parrot') is sung to the tune of the Batticaloa song Terra Iste Terra ('Land this land') and the Sinhala baila, Mee Vadayaki Jeevithe ('Life is a Honeycomb') is sung as Vi Minha Amor por Baila ('Come my Love to dance') in Batticaloa. Sinhala lyrics of these songs are different to the Sri Lanka Portuguese versions.

Kaffrinha's Afro-Portuguese connection is signalled through its etymon: Kaffir is an 'African' and nha is the Portuguese diminutive. Kaffrinha could mean 'a bit of African'. A 19th century manuscript in the Hugh Nevill Collection (British Library, London) includes six Kaffrinhas from the Eastern Province: Singellenona ('Sinhalese Lady'), Korra Jannethaie ('Blush Joanita'), Bastiahna ('Bastiana'), Chekoetie ('Whip') and Ama die none Frencena ('Love of Lady Francina') plus one untitled song grouped as "Cantiga De Purtiegese – Kaffrein – Neger Song Portigiese" ('Songs of the Portuguese—Kaffrinha—Portuguese Negro Songs'). There are no scores, however. My translations of these songs from Sri Lanka Portuguese into Standard Portuguese and English are in the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (Sri Lanka) and also in my first book, Tagus to Taprobane (Tisara Prakasakayo, Sri Lanka).

C. M. Fernando, son of Sir Marcus Fernando, who graduated in Law from the University of Cambridge, was the pioneer researcher of Portuguese music in Sri Lanka. After presenting his seminal paper, in 1894, to the Royal Asiatic Society (Colombo), he accompanied, on the piano, the 'Ceylon Portuguese' orchestra which consisted of a banderinha (mandolin), viaule (tenor violin) and rabana (tamborine).

Titles of scores published by Fernando and titles of songs in the Nevill manuscript (nineteenth century) are similar: Singallenona ('Sinhalese Lady'), Bastiana ('Bastiana'), Chikothi ('Whip') and Coran Janita ('Blush Joanita'). Kaffrinha's African connection is confirmed through the titles of songs in Fernando's paper: Velandá Mazambicu (Mozambican Town-dweller) and Caffri (African).

Fernando describes dances of the Portuguese Burghers as Chikothi and Cafferina [Kaffrinha]. A man and a woman, stand on opposite sides of a room and dance towards each other, exchanging old-fashioned courtesies when they meet in the middle of the room. The man waves a handkerchief and high steps to the beat whilst the lady lifts her long frilly skirt to manoeuvre the fast footsteps. Fernando contrasts the "Grotesque attitudes and alert movements" of the Kaffrinha with "the slow measures of the Chikothi" which call for "stately and dignified steps".

In my attempts to identify Chikothi, I made comparisons with the Goan Catholic form of music, song and dance: Mando. The Mando is a stately dance with dignified steps. I interviewed Anthony Noronha, former Conductor of the Nairobi Symphony Orchestra, when he had settled in London. Noronha drew my attention to the folk character of the Mando masterfully conveyed by starting on a minor key and modulating to a major key. At my request, Noronha scored a Mando called Surya Noketranche Porim Porzolleta ('You Shine just like the sun and the stars') which is published in my book – Portuguese in the East: A Cultural History of a Maritime Trading Empire (London: I B Tauris). Goan forms of music and dance – Mando, Dulpod and Dekhni - are different to Baila and Kaffrinha due to the varied durations of contact with the Portuguese and the diverse indigenous influences.

C.M. Fernando distinguishes Kaffrinha (fast and in 6/8 time - six quavers to a bar and having a "peculiar jerky movement") from Chikothi (in 3/8 time - three quavers to a bar and "slow and stately"). Fifty years before Fernando, Colonel Augustus de Butts in his book Rambles in Ceylon (1841), describes a "Caffre dance".

The dance somewhat resembled the fandango of Spain; but the resemblance, it must be confessed, was that of a caricature. Two individuals of opposite sexes gradually approach each other with an air of coquetry, making indescribable contortions and grimaces. The female slowly retires from the ardent advances of her lover, who, suiting the action to the word, endeavours to capture the fair fugitive, while he pours forth his tale of love in the most moving tropes that his eloquence can command. 'The lady of his love' at length abates somewhat of the air of scorn with which she at first affects to regard her impassioned swain, who, emboldened by this evidence of a favourable impression, and again alarmed at his own audacity, alternately advances towards and retreats from the object of his adoration.

This lively dance was popular with Europeans in Sri Lanka during the 19th century and by the early 20th century had filtered through to Sri Lankans who embraced western modernity. Twentieth century Kaffrinha arrangements by Norbert Rodrigo (Ceylonese Dances), Vincent Rodrigo (Ceylonese Lancers on Kaffrinha Airs and Professor Lord (Caffarina Quadrilles)

consist of five movements. The well known Kaffrinha, Singale Nona ('Sinhalese Lady'), is within the three scores. During the early 20th century Kaffrinha was danced in the fashionable Colombo suburb of Cinnamon Gardens, where all parties ended with Singale Nona. Singale Nona is today sung in Sinhala as "Yaman Selō Pra Kadanne". Kaffrinha is sparked off by cross rhythms and syncopations. Cross rhythms occur with interplay between 6/8 (six quavers to a bar) in the treble and 3/4 (three crotchets to a bar) in the bass. Syncopation involves shifting the accents to unorthodox places. Accenting the parts in-between beats or playing 'off the beat' drives the music and adds excitement to the performance. 'Kaffir airs' were published by Herr Somers, Band Master of the Ceylon Rifle Regiments, under the title After Supper Kaffir Quadrila but his scores have not been traced so far.

Contexts and descriptions of Kaffrinha vary. Novelist, Carl Muller's vivid descriptions in *Jam Fruit Tree* (1993):

"... and revels they were. The band had arrived: three boys in bow ties, two fiddles and a tom-tom and Jessie Ferdinands produced a harmonica and Finny Jackson played the spoons, clinkety-clack on his knees and a rollicking kaffrinja [Kaffrinha] set everybody in motion with Colontota's uncles hitching up their sarongs and jerking around shouting 'adi-ji adi-ji' and the ladies holding the sides of their skirts and high-stepping to the beat".

Kaffrinha can assume a comical character. In the late 19th century, C. Don Bastian, a pioneer Sinhala playwright, introduced Kaffrinha to the theatre through the jester singing a Kaffrinha at the start of *Rolina Nādagama* in 1879. In the twentieth century, Ediriweera Sarachchandra, Sri Lanka's foremost dramatist, identifies Kaffrinha as a body of music introduced by the Portuguese to Sri Lanka. Dēva Suriyasena, a pioneer of Sinhala music in the early 20th century, states that the lilting rhythm and tunes of Kaffrinha danced by Portuguese mercenaries, some of whom were Africans, fell on willing ears in the coastal areas.

Kaffrinha is also the traditional dance of the Batticaloa Burghers, calling for alert movements and accompanied by lively tunes. Typically four couples perform Kaffrinha at weddings. Marriage ceremonies are not complete until the Kaffrinha is danced. The bride and groom open the dance and are followed by the bridesmaid and best man and two further couples. Dancing continues for a few hours with only short breaks between the five movements when the musicians change mode.

The father of Alex Van Arkadie, a Burgher, was a close acquaintance of Wally Bastianz, the composer of *Chorus Baila* (generally known in Sri Lanka as *Baila*). Van Arkadie recalls Colombo's Kaffrinha dancers of the 1950s, travelling entertainers who performed once a year, in affluent Dutch Burgher houses. Instruments played were the viola, violin, *rabāna* (tambourine), triangle, piano accordion and gourd rattles (maracas). The most popular item in the variety entertainment show was the Kaffrinha, performed by a Burgher couple disguised as Africans by blackening their faces right down to the neck. Fingers were encased in white hand gloves to cover their paler skin. The man wore a prominent red bow-tie which fluttered freely against his long-sleeved brightly coloured satin shirt, a long tail-coat and a black top-hat which he tipped each time he curtsied and bowed before the lady who swung her flared skirt provocatively in order to respond to his charming gestures. The woman wore a wig of raven black hair in a mass of fine curls bunched together in tassels to hang from under a neatly draped *bandanna* ('scarf' from the Portuguese word *banda*). A colourful pair of large ear-rings and a string of large beads plunged down from her neck to her heavily endowed,

perhaps padded, bosom. Her taffeta blouse blended finely with her clothes but was in contrast to the man's shirt. Her sleeves held layers of frills which dangled and danced down from her shoulders to the rhythm of the beat. The provocative swing of her hips was exacerbated by her pronounced hips, accentuated with a cushion. Her rich satin skirt was flashily decorated in polka dots all-over, or broad bands of coloured borders at the hemline, and her underskirt was lace-edged or hand-embroidered. The Kaffrinha was a feast of captivating colourful flashes, entrancing movements and jubilant sounds made to the cheers and yells of the audience.

Leopold Ludovici, a surveyor, who visited a Kaffir village in Puttalam at the end of the 19th century, mistook the music, which he calls Kaffrinha, for being a fight. Kaffrinha is loud and energetic. The surveyor and writer, R. L. Brohier, described the music in a Puttalam village called Sellan Kandel, as Kaffrinha and Chikothi. He wrote in the 20th century that the 'Kaffir-Portuguese Chikothi' music had been absorbed into Sri Lankan popular culture, surfacing at gatherings which sought an outlet for hilarity - these were given the heterogeneous term Baila. Afro-European links of Kaffrinha and Baila are rekindling an interest in the music of Sri Lankans with African and European ancestry. But the music of the largest Afro-Sri Lankan community in Sirambiyadiya (Puttalam) is not Kaffrinha. Because their ethnonym is Kaffir (from the Arabic word qafir which means 'non-believer' and was used for Africans by the Arabs) their music is mistakenly assumed to be Kaffrinha. Lyrics of Manhas are mostly in Sri Lanka Portuguese, but the melodies are distinct from the Batticaloa Cantigas (songs) and Kaffrinhas.

A genre known as Vāde Baila ('debate Baila'), musical debates and contests of wit and repartée, were a popular form of entertainment in Sri Lanka. Sumathipala Perera, a leading Vāde Baila singer, formed a society to keep this form of art alive. This tradition is similar to *canto ao desafio* (Challenge Song) in Portugal and Brazil. Vāde Baila, perhaps due to its theatrical nature and demanding skills, has given way to Chorus Baila. The originator of Chorus Baila, Gajanayake Mudiyansele Ollington Mervin Bastianz (1913-85), is better known as Wally Bastianz. A single recording with 14 of his best known songs, released in 2004 by Torana (Colombo), sing out the poetry of the exotic performer which gripped the people. The simplicity of Bastianz's narratives and the realities that he addressed and played out with catchy rhythms, popularised Bailas. Bastianz was a brilliant lyricist, an educator and a critic. He evoked sentimental feelings of a nation whose values were distorted and strained by 450 years of western domination.

Wally Bastianz was called 'The Exotic Ceylonese Performer' when he featured in Colombo's night clubs. He was a versatile musician: he played the banjo, piano, ukulele, Spanish guitar, Sri Lankan *viola* and accordion. His band included Aelian Soysa, Marshall Wambeck, Anton Johns, Maxi Leonard and Morris Fernando. Bastianz sang in Sinhala, Tamil, English, Malay and Sri Lanka Portuguese, reaching out to all Sri Lankans. Listeners must understand the lyrics to fully appreciate Chorus Baila. Its value is not simply in the music. Ronald Walcott, an American musicologist, in his doctoral thesis submitted to the University of Sri Jayewardenepura (Sri Lanka), in 1978, highlights the poetic value of Baila which surpasses all else in importance. Traditionalists may be sceptical but they cannot disagree that Baila stirs Sri Lankans and as Aelian Soysa sings: "Lankavata Baila gena Wally Bastianz, Baila valin rata hollapu Baila champion" ('Wally Bastianz, who gave Baila to Sri Lanka was the Baila champion who moved the country with Baila') in a song dedicated to the maestro who changed the entertainment field in Sri Lanka and carved out a new identity for the Nation.

Maya Abeywickrama (2006) maps a few Bailas on to Western music - Hai hui Babi Achchige baisikel eka (Granny Babi's Bicycle) on to a well known march, 'Repasz Band', composed by Charles Sweeney. Another popular Baila, associated with Moratuwa, a town from where many Baila singers originate, Pun Sanda Pāya Moratuwa Dilennā (Moratuwa is shining under the full moon) is mapped on to 'On the Beach of Bali Bali', a Hawaiian song. Bailas are also influenced by other types of foreign music now. Baila has become a conduit for almost every major international popular musical trend, from Minstrelsy, Hawaiian, Country-Western, Caribbean Calypso, Zairian Soukous, north Mexican Mariachi and Disco. Gerald Wickremasooriya of Sooriya Records moved Baila into the age of rock 'n' roll by including electric guitars, drum kits and synthesisers by. Baila has travelled overseas with the Sri Lankan diaspora. Since Bastianz, Baila has evolved through different styles sung by soloists and groups. The dynamics of Baila has strengthened its popularity as the changing tastes of generations are absorbed and played out. As Sri Lanka discovered and explored her post-independent identity, Baila became more indigenised.

The word Baila has assumed the meaning 'song': Vāda Baila, Kāvadi Baila, Kāpiri Baila, Paraguayan Baila, Chorus Baila, Kapiriñña (Kaffrinha) Baila and Nidahasa (Independence) Baila. More importantly, Chorus Baila is confused with Vāda Baila as Wally Bastianz was a Vāda Baila singer when he composed Chorus Baila which instantaneously became popular. Chorus Baila is neither an import from Portugal nor a genre that was introduced by the Portuguese. Chorus Baila compositions were influenced by the Afro-Portuguese genre Kaffrinha and Vāda Baila. Chorus Baila signifies a new postcolonial identity, which represents the transformed Nation. Bastianz felt the pulse of the people and articulated their emotions by accentuating the heartbeat of Sri Lanka through his compositions of Chorus Baila.