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Tribal Music of Sri Lanka: A Qualitative Research on the Singing Style of the Dambana Indigenous People

Indigenous people (Ādivāsi) are usually an isolated community with a specific language, culture and way of life belonging to generations, endemic to each country or region. While indigenous communities are the inheritors of the earliest history of a country, those in Sri Lanka are referred to as the “Vedi” community (Veddahs). Possessing a unique language, culture and lifestyle, they have coined the term “Vanniyalæththo” (forest dwellers) to refer to themselves. The purpose of this research is to identify the music of the Dambana-Kotabakiniya Ādivāsi community and to examine the characteristics of their music in an ethnomusicological manner. This is qualitative research conducted through the use of audio-recorded interviews, field observations, informal discussions as well as written literature to collect data. The basic features of chanting can be seen in the Vedi chants of the Ādivāsi folk while reflections of man’s first attempts at singing a line of words can be gleaned at through Vedi songs. Vedi Daru Nalavili (indigenous lullabies) in the Dambana region are a prominent source in the study of ethnomusicology in Sri Lanka. This research also focuses on finding the unique identity possessed by Ādivāsi music through examination of the notations and tonality in the music.

Bios

Dasith Tilakaratna is a postgraduate student and temporary academic staff member of the Department of Physics, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka. He is an active researcher in the fields of physics, astronomy and science education, as well as in folklore and traditions of Sri Lanka and music production techniques. He has done work on multiple cultural and traditional industries in Sri Lanka, as well as on musical instruments and various sound production methods and techniques in contemporary times. As a multidisciplinary researcher, he shows interest in bridging together cultural practices in quantitative analysis methods to support and enhance qualitative data.

Iranga Weerakkody is Professor at the Department of Musicology, Faculty of Music of the University of the Visual and Performing Arts, and Director of the C. De S. Kulathilake Archival and Research Unit of the UVPA. She is an active researcher in the fields of ethnomusicology, folklore, and cultural practices of Sri Lanka. A member of the ICTMD, she has conducted many studies on a wide range of cultural communities found across the country and is recognized as an academic expert regarding Pasan (Passion) chants of Catholics in Sri Lanka and the Muhudu Veddo (coastal indigenous) community.