

Jim Sykes, *The Musical Gift: Sonic Generosity in Post-War Sri Lanka*

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. 288 pages, 30 photographs. Hardcover, \$60. ISBN: 9780190912024.

In *The Musical Gift*, Jim Sykes offers the reader a delightful tour of the musical history of Sri Lanka. The exploration of local musical repertoires, in combination with the historical and political analysis of contemporary Sri Lankan ethnic relations, provides ample fare for anthropologists and ethnomusicologists interested in sound, identity politics, and inter-community artistic interactions in South Asia.

Sykes compares two opposing approaches to sonic performances. The first suggests that music illustrates an individual's or community's identity. Sykes argues that this view essentializes cultural traditions, commodifies music for sale, and deepens the ethnic divides that plague the nation. The second asks how music functions in society. Ritual specialists in all of Sri Lanka's ethnic communities offer music (to deities, demons, ghosts, presidents, and other honorees) in ceremonies meant to propitiate, cure, and secure protection. Considering sound as a gift and a "technology of care" (11) emphasizes respectful interactions rather than difference, isolation, and hostility. The concept of sonic generosity forms the main theoretical contribution of the book.

Critics have often dismissed Sri Lankan music as derivative at best, or non-existent at worst. Sykes counters this argument by highlighting the richness of local drumming repertoires. In chapter 1, Sykes draws on data gathered in a coastal Sinhala Buddhist community from drummers of the Berava caste. He examines Berava healing rituals and religious musical offerings. Berava lineages own and jealously guard their mantras, dances, and drum patterns, which heal and protect those who hear them but can also cause harm if performed incorrectly or inappropriately. Sykes explores the interaction between Theravada Buddhism, which eschews music, and Sinhala sonic traditions. In order to avoid obvious meters and melodies (reminiscent of “music” and thus inappropriate for Buddhist ceremonies), Berava drummers have evolved a drum language, offering unique drum poetry that is rhythmic but not metered.

Sykes provides a concise summary of the island’s ethnic conflict. He notes that identity politics have influenced communities’ efforts to purify their musical traditions and deny or dismiss connections with music of other ethnic groups. Sykes emphasizes that in Berava drumming he has traced “an authentic Sinhala musical system back over a thousand years . . . [and] that it is not Tamil or Indian,” but he also notes that “it is a deeply heterogenous tradition that shows countless interactions with non-Sinhals over the centuries” (35). Throughout the volume, he explores inter-community sonic interactions, as well as efforts made to erase them.

In chapter 2, Sykes broadens the focus to examine three Sinhala traditions of Berava music, spread between the coastal low-country, rural hill country, and central up-country. He introduces the supernatural entities in the Sinhala pantheon and explains how ritual specialists interact with them through respectful offerings of sound and dance. Sykes compares the drums and drumming traditions, noting regional similarities and differences as well as the historical dynamics that shaped the repertoires.

Turning to the Sri Lankan Tamil community, in chapter 3 Sykes examines Tamil musical instruments and ritual traditions in the north and east of the island. Rituals and dramas based on Hindu epics form two main venues for local sonic productions. Sykes explores historical connections with South India as well as contemporary interactions and interdictions involving state and counter-state powers during and after the civil war.

In chapter 4, Sykes considers Sri Lanka’s Muslim community, exploring their Sufi devotional music as well as their experiences of violence and exile during and after the civil war. He also illustrates Christian, Southeast Asian, and African influences in Sri Lanka’s musical history. He writes about Baila (a pop music with Portuguese and African roots) and Sinhala folk music (elaborated with European influences). Providing a detailed analysis of the shapes, sounds, and functions of a variety of drums, harps, and wind instruments currently and historically used in Sri Lanka, he uncovers likely connections between regions. Sykes emphasizes the diversity of sources and traditions. He also notes common themes spanning all varieties of Sri Lankan music: that music relates not to ethnicity but to function (127), that hybridity is itself a key feature of the island’s musical tradition (129), and that collectively Sri Lanka’s traditions are quite similar to each other but different from those in neighboring India (134).

Chapter 5 explores musical gifts as technologies of protection and healing, using the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami and the civil war as contexts. Sykes draws on data from a Sinhala Buddhist exorcism and a Tamil Hindu possession story to show how ritual specialists interacted with a tsunami ghost and a protective goddess. This chapter

considers how the war affected musicians, particularly in the island's north and east; the war changed where, for whom, and by whom particular forms of music could be performed. Post-war efforts to achieve communal reconciliation have reintroduced musical giving, though not without resistance, as documented in the divisive debate surrounding the appropriate language (Sinhala or Tamil) in which to sing Sri Lanka's national anthem.

In the final chapter, Sykes examines how the discourse on music as an expression of identity formed and grew in Sri Lanka. Instead of acknowledging that maritime crossroads develop creolized traditions, this discourse sees islands as isolates, with a few natives and many migrants considered to be "from" elsewhere (213). Sykes takes a close look at the Sinhala origin myths currently popular on the island. He examines influences from the indigenous Vadda community, north and south India, and European conceptions and traditions during the colonial era, thus presenting a cosmopolitan, hybridized understanding of Sri Lanka's sonic heritage.

A reader clearly grasps the impressive depth of Sykes's knowledge of and passion for the traditions that he presents. The text is amply interspersed with informative footnotes that may interest specialists more than generalists. As an anthropologist, I would like to have learned more about Sykes's fieldwork experience, particularly his interactions with his key informant and teacher. The book is not about the ethnic conflict, but themes of ethnicity and conflict suffuse the discussion of musical traditions and histories of cosmopolitan art. At times, the argument left me wondering whether an academic book by a Westerner should have a political agenda for Sri Lanka (however egalitarian and cosmopolitan the intended outcome). I recommend this insightful book to scholars interested in Sri Lanka and South Asia. It will also appeal to practitioners who seek to use music to bridge gaps and reconcile ethnic animosities.

Michele Ruth Gamburd
Portland State University