

Preserving the Historical Field Recordings of C. de S. Kulatillake

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Abstract

Cyril de Silva Kulatillake was a pioneering Sri Lankan ethnomusicologist. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, he embarked on a journey to document Sri Lankan music using reel-to-reel audio tapes, travelling to numerous villages. This paper concerns the restoration and preservation of a part of the Kulatillake field recordings. The study restored the open reel tape recordings and carefully digitized the soundtracks. Each tape was meticulously examined and cleaned; and the tape containers and accompanying notes were documented and photographed. Once digitized, the recordings, which represent various ethnic groups in Sri Lanka, were catalogued. The collection captures a rich tapestry of Sinhala and Tamil songs, Portuguese Burghers' *baila* songs and Veddas' ancestral tunes, offering a soundscape of Sri Lanka's immaterial cultural heritage.

Keywords: C. de S. Kulatillake; ethnomusicologist; historical field recording; audio preservation; Sri Lankan music

Introduction

This paper concerns the field recordings of Cyril de Silva Kulatillake (1926–2005), who is usually referred to as C. de S. Kulatillake (Figure 1). His vision for preservation of folk music and traditional music, his philosophy and methodology for field recordings are invaluable resources for Sri Lanka's musical heritage. The objective of this paper is to document the process of restoring, digitising, and cataloging several tapes that were donated to the University of the Visual and Performing Arts by one of Kulatillake's colleagues. The article begins with biographical information on Kulatillake and his philosophy on ethnomusicology. The restoration and digitisation process is then outlined, and the contents of the collection are discussed.

Biography of Kulatillake

Kulatillake was born in the southern coastal town of Ambalangoda, where he received his formal education at the Ambalangoda Dharmashoka Vidyalaya. Sri Lanka was a British colonial subject until 1948, and as was typical for the time, the language of instruction was English. He began his career as an English instructor in the Teldeniya Maha Vidyalaya in the central hills near Kandy. His music education began overseas in 1952 at Visva Bharati in Santiniketan, West Bengal, India, where he learned to play *tabla*, *sitar* and *esraj* (Samarasinghe, 2023, p. 40). Santiniketan was a residential school established in 1921 by the Indian polymath Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), who sowed the seeds for reviving national heritage repressed under colonialism.

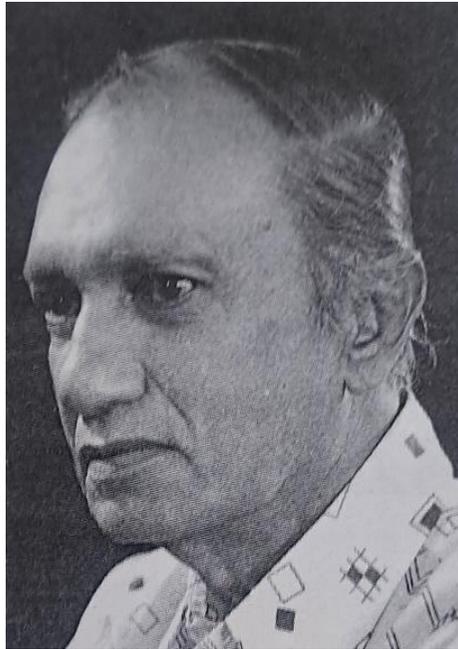


Fig. 1: C. de S. Kulatillake

Kulatillake specialized in *sitar*, *esraj* and *Tabla* at Vishava Bharati University from 1952–1956, and then served as a music instructor at the Teacher Training College in Mirigama, Sri Lanka. During this period, he came into contact with William Banda Makulloluwa (1922–1984), a ‘reform-minded theorist’ and ‘cultural nationalist’ (Peiris, 2017, p. 18) in the field of Sri Lankan music, whose position within the power structure enabled him to initiate institutional

change. Makulloluwa appointed Kulatillake to important public bodies including the Folk Music Panel of the Arts Council. Both Makulloluwa and Kulatillake were interested in marginalized forms of folk music in Sri Lanka. Makulloluwa introduced the study of diverse forms of folk music to the school curriculum and also organised regular workshops for teachers (Wijewardena, 1994, p. 62). Makulloluwa's appointment as the Chief Inspector of Music (1953–1956) coincided with the rise of a populist Sinhalese ethno-nationalist government (Peiris, 2017, p. 21; Reed, 2011, pp. 135–136). At the time, the traditional music of the Sinhalese, the largest ethnic group in Sri Lanka, had the endorsement of the establishment which favoured a homogenous culture, and that continued after independence. Kulatillake worked for the Music Research Unit at the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (then known as the Ceylon Broadcasting Corporation) and became its head in 1970, a position from which he retired in 1986 after 16 years of service. During his retirement, Kulatillake delivered guest lectures at the Institute of Aesthetic Studies (IAS), University of Kelaniya in 1990 and continued to serve until his death.¹

C. de S. Kulatillake's study visits to Germany, Norway and the Netherlands inspired his approaches to archiving music. During his period of service at the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC), Kulatillake met Josef Kuckertz, a German ethnomusicologist, which led to a study trip at the University of Cologne. Kulatillake visited the Freiburg Germany Folk Music Archives and the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, where he learned to play *gamelan* music from Sri Superdjan of Java (Kulatillake, 1992). A publication entitled *Kolam – The Masked Play* (Kulatillake, no date), a recording and commentary including photographs resulted from the collaboration between Kuckertz and Kulatillake. A collaborative project between the University of Oslo and the IAS introduced Kulatillake to Kjell Skjellstad, a Norwegian ethnomusicologist. Kulatillake was invited to deliver lectures at the Department of Music and Theatre, University of Oslo. In addition to field recordings, Kulatillake's legacy includes books and booklets, written in both Sinhala and English, which began in 1962 with his first publication, *Kramawath Esraj Vadanaya (Orderly performance of Esraj)* (Kulatillake, 1962).

¹ The IAS is now an independent state university called the University of the Visual and Performing Arts (UVPA) in Colombo.

During Kulatillake's travels throughout Sri Lanka, he meticulously collected music and conducted research. In 1970, Kulatillake employed a Tandberg (mono) tape recorder for his initial field recordings. He transitioned to using an Uher 1400 machine in 1974. **Fig.2 and 3** depict tape recorders that Kulatillake used later in the 1980s. The two recorders are the same brands as those he used in the previous decade, but the Uher 160 is a later stereo portable cassette recorder. Both machines pictured are stored at the C. de S. Kulatillake Research and Archival Centre at the UVPA, Colombo and are not in working order.



Fig.2: Tandberg series 11 recorder used by C. de S. Kulatillake
Photography: Kamani Samarasinghe.



Fig.3: Uher CR 160 recorder used by C. de S. Kulatillake
Photography: Kamani Samarasinghe.

Kulatillake's ethnomusicological philosophy

Folk music concerns the music of the people, often passed down through generations within communities. It is characterized by oral transmission, and lyrics that reflect the everyday life, social customs, and cultural practices (Makuloluwa, 2000; Nettl, 1989). Traditional music in Sri Lanka is observed as formalised and structured, evolving from folk music but closely linked to recognised cultural and religious practices and distinct from folk music.

Traditional music in Sri Lanka encompasses Kandyan Dance Music, Low Country Ruhuna Dance Music, Sabaragamuwa Dance Music and instruments such as the *geta beraya* (barrel drum) from Kandyan Dance Music, *yak beraya* (low country drum) from Low Country Ruhuna Dance and the *davla* (a two headed barrel drum played with a stick on one hand and by the hand on the other) from Sabaragamuwa Dance Music deeply rooted in the country's cultural and religious heritage. Kandyan dance music is popular and native to the area called Kandy of the Central hills' region in Sri Lanka. Low Country Dance Music is popular in coastal areas of the Western and Southern Provinces. Sabaragamuwa Dance Music is popular in Kegalle, Ratnapura, Kalawana, Balangoda and Badulla divisions.

Religion holds a central position in Sri Lankan society and folk songs play a pivotal role in expressing the spiritual dimensions of diverse faith traditions. Whether in the Sinhala Buddhist, Tamil Hindu, Christian, or Muslim communities, religious folk songs serve as vehicles for conveying devotional sentiments and narratives. The occupational diversity within Sri Lanka also finds expression through its folk songs, which chronicle the laborious routines and unique skills associated with various professions. From songs of fishermen casting their nets to those depicting the rhythmic beat of agricultural activities, these compositions serve as sonic narratives of the island's economic tapestry. Beyond amusement, festivals, occupation and religion, Sri Lankan folk songs encompass a myriad of themes reflecting everyday life, love, nature and societal dynamics. Philip Bohlman (1988) stressed the vitality of folk music in non-Western cultures. The Kulatillake collection is an asset to scholars who accept "folk music as the product of new cultural processes, especially modernization and urbanization" (Bohlman, 1988, p. xix). Furthermore, Bohlman asked if scholars might reformulate the

canons of folk music to recognise the new texts that change has yielded to folk music.

Exposed to a philosophy of revival of tradition and fostering a vision of the unity of humanity through universal knowledge (*Visva Bharati*) transcendence of religious and cultural barriers is apparent in Kulatillake's collection, which includes the music of the multi-ethnic multi-religious culture scape of Sri Lanka. Instead of collecting music of the larger ethnic groups such as the Sinhalese and Tamils, Kulatillake included music of the Veddas, Burghers and Afro-Sri Lankans also, in addition to the music of the Tamils and Sinhalese, acknowledging the diversity in the music landscape. The Veddas or *Wanniyalaeto* have a song for every activity such as honey gathering and a unique lullaby. Chant-like songs of "Afro-Sri Lankans" (i.e. of African descent) are called *Manja* and are accompanied by drumming to remembered rhythms and dancing. The Portuguese Burghers traditional music, song and dance are called *Kaffrinha*. The Tamil people of Sri Lanka have a variety of traditional songs, including those about their faith, profession, festivals and entertainment. The content of Kulatillake's collection will be explained in what follows.

Restoring and digitising the collection

Fig.4 and 5 show the spool tapes researchers found. The recordings are currently stored in the Archive Centre, Department of Ethnomusicology, Faculty of Music, University of the Visual and Performing Arts, Colombo.



Fig.4: Open reel tapes with boxes

Photograph: Kamani Samarasinghe.



Fig.5: Tapes used during recording.

Photograph: Kamani Samarasinghe.

A vacuum cleaner was first used to remove the dust. Each tape was then evaluated, cleaned, and the front and back of the tape container were photographed. The reel itself and any supplementary documents or notes inside the box were also photographed. Due to the absence of playback equipment at UVPA, all the tapes were entrusted to an external professional for digitisation. The recordings were digitised at 44.1 kHz sampling rate and a bit depth of 16 and saved as uncompressed WAV files, following standard practice in Sri Lanka. The provider was instructed to split distinct tracks within a single reel into separate audio files. The majority of the tapes bore handwritten notes by Kulatillake, authenticated with his signature and accompanied by dates of his field recordings (**Fig.6**).



Fig.6: A tape with Kulatillake's handwritten notes and his signature.

Photograph: Kamani Samarasinghe.

AMPEX , BASF, AGFA, Maxell, as well as EMITAPE brands were present in the collections. There was a variety of reel sizes found, with the majority of the reels having a diameter of 5 inches. The two primary tape speeds were $7\frac{1}{2}$ and $3\frac{3}{4}$ inches per second. The recordings were often made using different track configurations, such as quarter-track, full-track, or half-track per side. All the tapes in this historical field recordings were successfully digitised because they were in good condition; restoration works not needed. Each tape could result in a number of digitised audio files. Once digitised, the file was saved as a WAV format.

Content of the collection

This collection comprises a diverse array of music recordings, representing a tapestry of ethnic groups. In the *Population of Sri Lanka in 1971* (1972, p. 44), the ethnic groups were Sinhalese (Low country and Kandyan), Tamils (Ceylon and Indian), Burghers and Eurasians, Malays, Veddas (*Vanniyalaaththo*) and Afro-Sri Lankans. Within this unknown collection, one can find the Sinhala music, Tamil music, the Portuguese Burghers' *baila*² songs, and even the

² A genre associated with the Portuguese colonizers. See Ariyaratne (2007); de Silva Jayasuriya (2008; 2013).

Veddas' songs. Together, these recordings offer a harmonious blend of cultural expressions, weaving a vibrant narrative of Sri Lanka's diverse heritage. The audio tape recordings have been tabulated from Kulatillake's original handwritten notes and voice recording. Genres in Table 1 below are explained in the pages that follow.

Location of Recording	Type of Recording and Genre³
Embekke, Kandy	Instrumental Music
Arugambay	<i>Nadagam</i> music (traditional drama music)
Henanigala	Vedda lullaby, Vedda <i>bambara</i> (wasp) <i>yaadini</i> (prose narration)
Idamegama, Kandy	<i>Nelum kavi</i> (weeding, planting/transplanting poetry)
Horana	<i>Vannams</i> ⁴
Millana	Vedda songs
Unspecified	<i>Kurahan kavi</i> , <i>Rankothalae kavi</i> (a folk poem associated with a small clay pot filled with turmeric water used by dancers in rituals), <i>kohoba heella</i> (poetry about the god Kohoba), drum music, <i>Thuranga</i> (horse) <i>vannama</i>
Uduwa	<i>Raban pada</i>
Unspecified	Tamil fisherman song, <i>Pasam</i>
Batticaloa (1972) ⁵	<i>Naatu Kuttu</i> (Tamil folk drama), Portuguese <i>baila</i> – wedding song

³ The genres in the table are explained in the text that follows and the orthography is copied from Kulatillake's handwritings.

⁴ *Vannama* (singular), *Vannam* (plural) in Sinhala. According to Almut Jayaweera (2004, p. 2) *Vannama* is the Sinhala version of the Sanskrit word *varnam*.

⁵ Only some recordings are dated.

Negombo, Clement's Place (1976)	<i>Divaya sapprasada pasam kavi</i>
Mathiwela	<i>Keli Gee</i>
Nugawela, Kandy	Drum music of <i>Kohombakankari</i> (Kandyan style of dancing), Goddess Pattni <i>Kolmura kavi</i> (poetries about the life story and power of goddess Pattini)
Ulhitiya (1983)	Vedda songs
Mampitiya, Tirappuwa, Araththana, Handessa	<i>Nelum ose, Yashodara</i> (wife of Prince Siddhartha lamentation) <i>wilapaya, Nelum kavi</i>
Bentare and Urugasmanhandiya (1988)	<i>Kiri amma kannalaw</i> (array of female deities who are supposed to inflict sickness on children) and verses
Kandy	<i>Kuveni Asne</i> (type of prose narration with a particular arrangement and moods the lamentation of the Yakkha girl Kuveni who had been banished together with her children by her husband, Prince Vijaya)
Unspecified	Christian <i>geethika</i> (hymns)

Table 1: Recording locations and genre details.

Among the captivating recordings in this collection are the folk music of the Veddas, the original inhabitants of the Island (Seligmann and Seligmann, 1911; De Silva, 2011). Veddas are a minority indigenous community that is considered the oldest ethnic group in Sri Lanka (Dona, 2019). According to Kulatillake's handwritten notes which accompanied tape (**Fig.7**), the music of the Veddahs was recorded in Millana, Dimbulagala, Polonnaruwa District, North Central Province, Henanigala, Ampara District, Eastern Province, and Ulhitiya, Badulla District, Uva Province. Vedda's hunting songs, lullabies, love songs and *Kiri Koraha* ritual songs were included in those tapes. *Kiri Koraha* is a ritualistic dance performance practised by the Vedda people to invoke blessings from deities (Rajapakse, 2004). The tape labelled K 14, K19

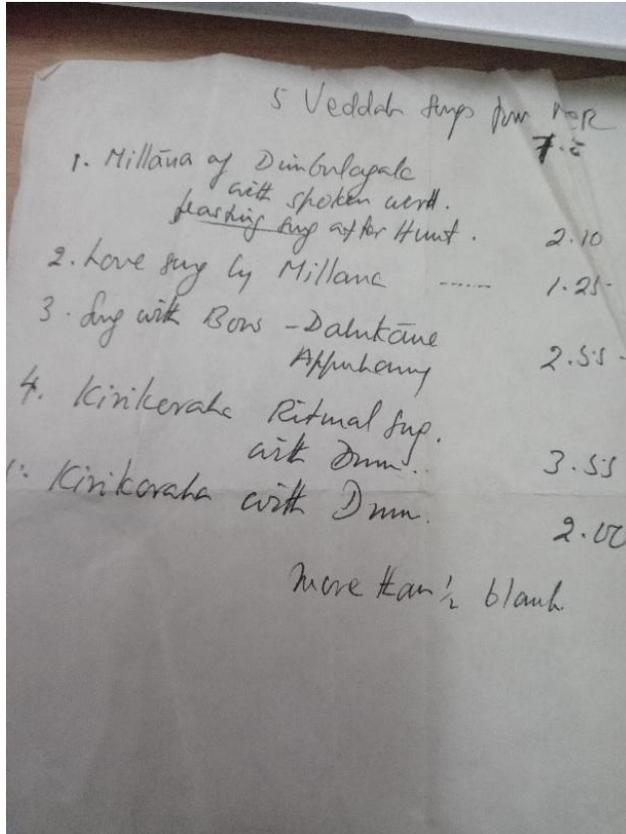


Fig. 7: Millana field recording notes inside the tapes written in English by Kulatillake.
 Photograph: Kamani Samarasinghe.

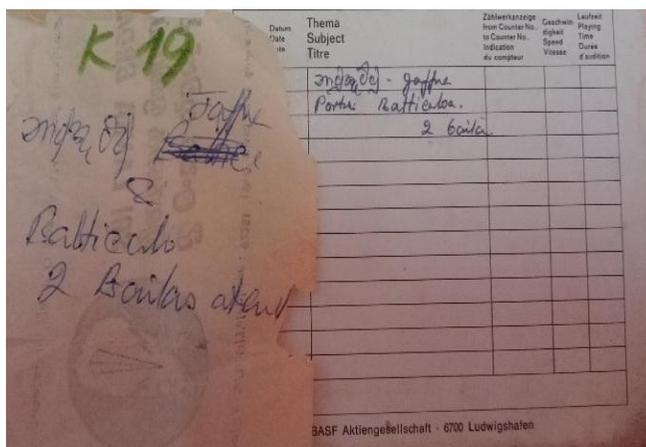


Fig.8: Notes for a tape labelled K19.
 Photograph: Kamani Samarasinghe.

included Portuguese *baila* and Tamil *Natukuttu* songs recorded on November 11th, 1972 at Batticaloa, in the Eastern Province (**Fig.8 & 9**).



Fig.9: Notes on tape K14 written by Kulatillake on June 6th, 1976, which included *Pasam* or *Pasan* (Passion) songs of the Catholic population in Sri Lanka (Kulatillake 1976; Pilendran 1998).

Photograph: Kamani Samarasinghe.

Pasam songs in Sri Lanka combine South Indian Carnatic tunes with Christian hymns from the imprisonment trial and crucifixion of Jesus (Kulatillake, 1976), and was well recorded with details by him (**Fig.10**).

While transplanting paddy, groups of women sing transplanting songs – *Nelum Gee* (Samarasinghe and Nethsinghe, 2023). The “Ose” style and the “Sindu style” are the two main styles of *Nelum Gee*. Kulatillake recognises a few songs, including *Pirith Ose*, *Kinduru Ose*, *Namaskara Ose* and *Horane Ose*. “Ose” style has various forms, all of which are performed at a slow speed, but “Sindu” style is sung at a quicker speed at the end of a transplanting session (Kulatillake, 1976). The literature (Kulatillake, 1975; Rajapakse, 2004; Samarasinghe and Nethsinghe, 2023) reveals that *Nelum* songs are common

in Kandyan villages and this collection includes recordings made in Kandy Idamegama, Tirappuwa, Handessa, Araththana, Mampitiya and Handessa. *Kurahan Kavi* are songs performed while harvesting *Kurakkan* or *Kurahan* (finger millet), which was one of the principal crops farmed in Sri Lanka in general. *Raban Gee* (songs) is a musical tradition performed while playing the *Rabana*, a hand drum held in one hand and played with the other.

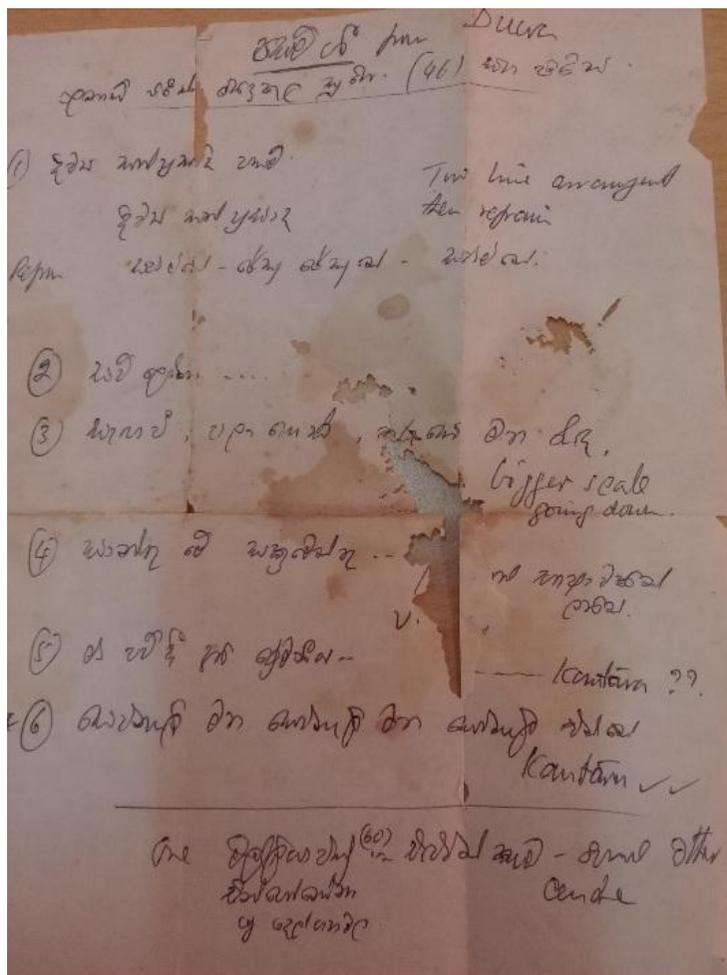


Fig.10: *Pasam Gee* recording notes.

Photograph: Kamani Samarasinghe

According to Kulatillake (1976), *Raban Gee* was well-known among the distinct communities within the Matara, Akuressa, Horana and Huiikaduwa in the Kandy District and this research investigation has identified a recording of *Raban Gee* from the Uduwa region in Horana. *Keli Gee* are

songs that are sung at folk games and dances. The titles of the games, such as *Lee Keli Gee* (Songs of the Stick Dance), help to identify them (Kulatillake, 1976). *Vannam* are “a type of songs originally composed for singing in the courts. At present there is a set of *Vannams* popular among the traditional dancers who have transformed them into 18 dance solo episodes (known as *Daha-ata Vannam*)” (Kulaatilleka 1976).

Those solo episodes are (according to Jayaweera, 2004; Kulatillake, 1976): *Ganapathi* (about God Ganesh), *Musaladi* (Hare) *Vannama*, *Gajaga* (Elephant) *Vannama*, *Vairodi* (the Cat’s Eye/Precious Stone), *Hanuma* (Monkey) *Vannama*, *Thuranga* (Horse) *Vannama*, *Udara* (on bravery) *Vannama*, *Gahake Vannama* (Vannama of the Conch), *Surapathi* (about Umayangana) *Vannama* audio recording made in the Horana area in the western province and other unnamed places. *Vannam* forms an important part of music in the Sinhala tradition. This research identified *Ganapathi* (about God Ganesh), *Musaladi* (Hare) *Vannama*, *Gajaga* (Elephant) *Vannama*, *Hanuma* (Monkey) *Vannama*, *Thuranga* (Horse) *Vannama*, *Vairodi* (Cat’s Eye/Precious Stone), *Udara* (about bravery) *Vannama*, *Gahake Vannama* (Vannama of the Conch) recording made in the Horana area. Within this collection of reel-to-reel tapes, a diverse soundscape of Sinhalese folk songs is preserved, including the enchanting melodies of *Nelum Gee*, *Kurahan Kavi*, *Rankothalae Kavi*, *Raban Pada*, *Keli Gee* and *Vannams*. These recordings capture the diverse cultural expressions in various regions across Sri Lanka, offering a unique sonic collection that reflects the vibrant musical heritage of the island. The nuanced exploration of these traditional tunes provides valuable insights into the regional variations and cultural richness embedded in the fabric of Sri Lankan music.

The files and metadata are not yet accessible on-line because the Department of Ethnomusicology due to financial constraints. Discussions on making the collection available worldwide are ongoing. Ethnomusicologist could make field recordings today and make comparisons with the 1970’s Kulatillake historical collection.

Conclusion

The journey to preserve a part of the C. de S. Kulatillake field recordings is a vital step in conserving Sri Lanka’s rich cultural heritage. The collection, assiduously gathered and transmitted by Kulatillake, captures not just the

rhythms and melodies of a diverse and culturally dynamic nation, but also its nuances. The discovery of a treasure trove of open reel tapes, meticulously documented by Kulatillake, provides a unique glimpse into the cultural diversity of Sri Lanka. From Vedda music to Portuguese *baila* songs and Tamil *Natukuttu*, these recordings represent the multiplicity of cultures that form an intricate soundscape of ethnic groups, each contributing to the vibrant sounds of Sri Lanka's cultural heritage. Of particular significance are the Vedda music recordings, bearing witness to the oldest ethnic groups. These recordings offer invaluable insight into the rituals, hunting songs, lullabies and *Kiri Koraha* ritual dances of the Veddas. Kulatillake's collection reveals a rich diversity of cultures present on the island, from the mournful *Pasam* songs to the melodious *Nelum Gee* and the rhythmic *Raban Gee*. This research paves the way for continued exploration, analysis and appreciation of multifaceted traditions that make up the sonic landscape of the island. We not only pay tribute to the pioneering work of C. de S. Kulatillake, but also reaffirm our commitment to safeguard musical heritage that continue to resonate through the melodies and rhythms of the past. This exploratory case study is intended to inspire further initiatives in safeguarding historical audio archives and ensure that the echoes of Sri Lanka's diverse cultural heritage are preserved for future generations to explore, experience and identify with.

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