

# Introduction

Mahagama Sekera (1929–76) was a Sinhalese lyricist and poet from Sri Lanka. In 1966 Sekera gave a lecture in which he argued that a test of a good song was to take away the music and see whether the lyric could stand on its own as a piece of literature.<sup>1</sup> Here I have translated the Sinhala-language song Sekera presented as one that aced the test.<sup>2</sup> The subject of this composition, like the themes of many songs broadcast on Sri Lanka's radio since the late 1930s, was related to Buddhism, the religion of the country's majority.

The Niranjana River  
Flowed slowly along the sandy plains  
The day the Buddha reached enlightenment.  
The Chief of the Three Worlds attained samadhi in meditation.  
He was liberated at that moment.

In the cool shade of the snowy mountain ranges  
The flowers' fragrant pollen  
Wafted through the sandalwood trees  
Mixed with the soft wind  
And floated on.

When the leaves and sprouts  
Of the great Bodhi tree shook slightly  
The seven musical notes rang out.  
A beautiful song came alive  
Moving to the *tāla*.

The day the Venerable Sanghamitta  
 Brought the branch of the Bodhi tree to Mahamevuna Park  
 The leaves of the Bodhi tree danced  
 As if there was such a thing as a  
 “Mahabō Vannama.”<sup>3</sup>

The writer of this song is Chandrarathna Manawasinghe (1913–64).<sup>4</sup> In the Sinhala language he is credited as the *gīta racakayā* (lyricist). Manawasinghe alludes in the text to two Buddhist legends and a Sinhalese style of dance. The first legend is the story of the Buddha’s enlightenment. The second is the tale of Sanghamitta, who brought a sapling of the sacred Bodhi tree to Sri Lanka to spread the Buddhist doctrine. In the final stanza Manawasinghe playfully suggests that the Bodhi tree’s leaves, under which the Buddha achieved enlightenment, were delighted to find a home in Sri Lanka to the extent that they danced to a new *vannama* (Sinhala court song) called the “Mahabō Vannama” (The vannama of the Great Bodhi Tree).<sup>5</sup>

The English translation may convey useful information about the song’s meaning. But it communicates little about the Sinhala-language text’s formal features. Manawasinghe created a new poetic meter for this song. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Sinhala poets often wrote quatrains (four-line stanzas) with lines having an equal amount of syllabic instants, which are metrical units of time that scholars in the fields of phonetics and phonology term *mora*. Mora is known in Sinhala poetry as *mātrā*, which can be either light (*luhu*, *laghu*) or heavy (*guru*).<sup>6</sup>

Manawasinghe’s poetic meter was new because his four stanzas diverged from the convention of four lines with an equal amount of *mātrā*. One could analyze Manawasinghe’s lyric like this: the first line of each stanza has three phrases that are eight, eight, and ten *mātrā*. The second comprises two phrases that are five and ten *mātrā*, respectively. The third line has four phrases that are five, ten, five, and five *mātrā*, respectively.<sup>7</sup> Consider, for example, the *mātrā* groupings in the first stanza here. Each long vowel, indicated with a macron, counts as two *mātrā*:

Text of Stanza 1	Mātrā Structure
vālitala atarē—hemihīṭa basinā—nēraṇjana nadiyē	8—8—10
gayāhisa—vāḍasiṭa buduvuṇudā	5—10
tilōhimi—moksuva lada mohotē—samādī—bāvanā	5—10—5—5

The song’s formal and semantic features surely factored into Sekera’s judgment that Manawasinghe’s composition could stand on its own as a piece of literature. One can conjecture further that Sekera’s evaluation was influenced by the medium through which he contemplated the literary features of Manawasinghe’s song lyric. In 1957 Manawasinghe had printed the radio song’s text in a songbook (fig. 1).<sup>8</sup> When Sekera reflected on the literary qualities of Manawasinghe’s creation,

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FIGURE 1. "Mahabō Vannama" (Vannama of the Great Bodhi Tree). Chandrarathna Manawasinghe, *Kōmala Rēkhā* (Colombo: New Lila Mudranalaya, 1957), 21. Courtesy of Udaya Manawasinghe.

Sekera's contemplation was likely akin to the experience of silently reading modern poetry in print.

#### ETHNOMUSICOLOGY AND THE STUDY OF SONG TEXTS

When I conducted research in Sri Lanka about the modern history of Sinhala song, I struggled to translate texts of radio songs like Manawasinghe's because of its literary lexicon, formal features, poetic syntax, and allusions to Sinhala Buddhist legends. I also struggled to understand Sinhala-language articles that asked questions about the literary aspects of such songs. Many of the articles began with the question, "what is song?" (*gītaya yānu kumakda?*). I expected such articles to focus on Sinhala "music." However, the authors would invariably define song in relation to poetry and then launch into content analysis of lyrics and poetry.<sup>9</sup>

"Lyrics and poetry?" I thought, "What does the relationship between lyrics and poetry have to do with making music?" I was trained in the academic discipline of ethnomusicology, a branch of knowledge that came into being in America in the 1950s due to a fusion between comparative musicology and cultural anthropology. Ethnomusicologists study how people make and experience music and why doing so is important to them.

One might assume that the production of song texts would occupy an important place in the scholarship of ethnomusicologists. The study of song texts had been a major issue in chapters 9 and 10 of Alan P. Merriam's seminal *The Anthropology of Music* (1964).<sup>10</sup> When I entered graduate school in 2006, however, interest in the study of song texts had waned in favor of the two traditional features of ethnomusicology: music analysis and ethnography.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the challenge of ethnomusicology is to combine cultural anthropology's participant-observation with comparative musicology's music analysis.

Yet this challenge seems to have left little room for the focused discussion of song text. Translations and analyses of song texts, admittedly, do appear in articles and monographs written by ethnomusicologists. But ethnomusicologists tend to consider song texts worthy of analysis when analyzed *in relation to* musical sound or live performance.<sup>12</sup> Because ethnomusicologists tend to accord much value to the text-in-relation-to-music approach, scholars who aim to contribute to the field rarely devote sustained attention to song texts themselves.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, song lyricists are not a commonly discussed social actor in ethnomusicology.

When ethnomusicologists favor ethnography and music analysis over song texts, one problem may consequently arise: there exists a limitation on the kinds of questions that can be asked about the efforts of songwriters. Ethnomusicologists have seldom attempted to explain why, for example, songwriters at a particular historical juncture attempted to write literary instead of colloquial song texts.

To attempt to answer such a question, ethnomusicologists will need to develop critical methods that diverge from the standard approach of ethnography and music analysis.

The need for new critical methods is especially pronounced when confronted with the genre of radio song created in postcolonial Sri Lanka, because it is a type of song with an accompanying scholarly discourse that often places more emphasis on song texts than music itself (recall that Sekera argued that the measurement of a good song was to remove the music and judge whether the lyric could stand on its own as a piece of literature). Also, this genre of song was not intended for live stage performance.<sup>14</sup> Admittedly, there was the performance in the radio station's studio. Yet the purpose of this live performance was to create a unique aural experience transmitted by radio waves.

How did songwriters produce a unique aural experience? In the 1950s, when Manawasinghe was active as a songwriter, the common practice was to imitate an Indian film song melody but compose new Sinhala lyrics roughly according to the Indian film song text's long and short *mātrā*. In Sri Lanka the practice came to be known derogatorily as *vacana dānavā* ("putting words"). The term alluded to the idea that a Sinhalese songwriter merely had to put words onto an Indian film song's text like an unskilled mason clumsily puts one brick on top of another. "*Vacana dānavā*," wrote Manawasinghe, "was a term used to describe how lyricists would take the words of a Hindi-language song and replace them with Sinhala-language words that sounded somewhat the same."<sup>15</sup> In this environment, most Sinhalese songwriters did not think of song as an elevated form of expression.

This context helps to shed light on why radio songwriters like Manawasinghe were eager to circulate their song texts through print: print possessed the power to poeticize. Print stripped away the sounds of music and bestowed on the ephemeral language of song a literary fixity. In other words, print transformed an aural experience of listening to music into a visual experience of reading poetry. Print also endowed the songwriter with authorship at a time when record labels did not print the names of lyricists on their gramophone records. Print clearly contributed to the conditions of possibility for Mahagama Sekera to take the music away and analyze the semantic and formal features of song texts.

What approach, then, does *Modernizing Composition* attempt to introduce to ethnomusicology? I seek to rethink the phenomenon of song texts through an interdisciplinary intervention. One can identify two forms of interdisciplinary scholarship: the theoretical and areal. Theoretical scholars analyze a subject studied in depth by colleagues in their home discipline, but they deploy theory from outside the discipline to illuminate an unseen facet of the subject. In contrast, areal scholars focus on a particular period and place to reveal a basis for comparison between seemingly disparate phenomena. *Modernizing Composition* is an example of the areal approach because the manuscript focuses on one period

and place—twentieth-century Sri Lanka—to compare song texts and poetry. I focus on song produced for theater, gramophone, or radio, as well as poetry crafted in metered quatrains or free verse.<sup>16</sup> In the following section I explain why my particular case study necessitated this dual focus.

#### “WHAT IS SONG?”

Given my training in ethnomusicology to privilege ethnography and analysis of musical sound, I felt frustrated that the Sinhala articles I was reading contained little information about musicians and music but much about lyricists, song texts, and poetry. I became more confused when I opened up books that claimed to analyze poetry but found exegeses of song lyrics instead. As I dug deeper, however, I started to pay closer attention to the Sinhala essays that asked, “what is song?” One such essay was Sunil Ariyaratne’s introduction to the first anthology of modern Sinhala song lyrics.<sup>17</sup>

In the essay Ariyaratne attempted to answer the question, “what is song?” by describing the differences between song and poetry. Some differences were obvious to me: one person can write a poem. But a song needs a lyricist, composer, and singer. A poem is a reading experience. Song is an aural experience. Poems have no refrain. Songs do. Poems can be long. Songs must be under five minutes and usually have three or four sections at most. Readers of poems must read the text multiple times to comprehend the meaning. Listeners of song should be able to grasp the meaning after one hearing.<sup>18</sup>

These differences may seem obvious today. Nevertheless, they are distinctions with origins in the early twentieth century. Such distinctions became normal in South Asia and other world regions after the introduction of gramophone song at the turn of the twentieth century and the concomitant growth of publishers who printed modern poetry in vernacular languages.

Traditionally, in South Asia there were no clear distinctions between poetry and song. Literature tended to be experienced in ways that today are reserved for song: a poem was made known to the public when it was first recited from a written text for an audience.<sup>19</sup> Literature almost invariably meant poetry, and “poetry” in South Asia was a practice in which a performer usually sang texts rich in poetic meters, rhyme schemes, and musical styles. That is why, to take an example from East India, the Odia-language poet Fakiramohan Senapati wrote in his autobiography sometime in the 1860s that the ordinary literate people at that time were not used to printed works, especially to prose: “Whenever they [the literate people] tried to read the few Oriya [Odia-language prose] books in existence such as *Nitika* or *Hitopadesha*,” Senapati observed, “they would try to sing the words and express surprise and irritation at not being able to find the rhyme or metre.”<sup>20</sup> On the one hand, then, Ariyaratne’s song-poetry distinctions can be traced to the global onset of gramophone song at the turn of the twentieth century.

On the other hand, Ariyaratne discussed differences between song and poetry that were less obvious to me because of their roots in the lifeworlds of premodern Sri Lanka and South Asia. One song-poetry difference was specific to the Sinhala language itself, a language with traditions of poetry and criticism that date from at least the seventh century C.E.<sup>21</sup> Ariyaratne maintained that poets enjoy freedom when selecting lexicon, but lyricists must select certain types of words. Because lyricists should select lexicon that has a musical quality (*sugēya*), they ought to employ *svarānta vacana* (Sinhala words ending in a vowel) and refrain from *halanta vacana* (Sinhala words ending in a consonant).<sup>22</sup>

Ariyaratne also mentioned a uniquely South Asian distinction between song and poetry: songwriters should give pride of place to *śabda dhvaniya*, aesthetic sentiment derived from the *sounds* in language, whereas poets must accord prominence to *artha dhvaniya*, aesthetic sentiment derived from *meaning* in language. The distinction underscored Sri Lanka's historical connections with India: the terms *artha* (meaning), *śabda* (meaning-bearing sound), and *dhvani* (communication of aesthetic experience with language through the method of suggestion) were categories of analysis developed by Sanskrit grammarians and logicians of ancient India.<sup>23</sup> Sinhala songwriters and poets also commonly use the ancient Indian term *rasa* (sentiment; emotion evoked in the listener) in discussions of Sinhala song and poetry. In Sri Lanka these Sanskrit terms for literary analysis can be traced to the early centuries of the second millennium, when Sinhala poets began to craft poems sensitive to the Sanskrit philosophy of language and its tradition of literary criticism. Ariyaratne's multifaceted conception of the differences between poetry and song thus provide us with a compelling introduction to twentieth-century Sinhala-language song and poetry's layers of modern and premodern, as well as local, regional, and global influences.

I derived the principal questions that motivated me to write this book from the issues thus far discussed: Manawasinghe's poetic song lyric about the Buddha's enlightenment; the traditional nature of song and poetry in South Asia; and Ariyaratne's and Sekera's perspectives on song as an art form that must be considered in relation to poetry. The monograph's main questions are as follows: Why did Sinhalese lyricists compose poetic songs in the twentieth century? Why did Sekera contend that "a test of a good song was to take the music away and see whether the lyric could stand on its own as a piece of literature"?<sup>24</sup> Why did Ariyaratne define modern song in relation to poetry? If Ariyaratne thought it was crucial to study Sinhala song in relation to poetry, would it be fair for me to isolate song without paying attention to poetry? I became convinced that if I focused on song and kept poetry at a distance I would overlook something important, important not only to music history in Sri Lanka but also to the history of the performing arts and literature in modern South Asia.

MODERNIZING COMPOSITION AND THE  
STUDY OF SONG AND POETRY IN  
TWENTIETH-CENTURY SOUTH ASIA

Sinhalese lyricists, poets, singer-songwriters, and composers in twentieth-century Sri Lanka tended to hail from the Buddhist middle class. I use the term “Buddhist middle class” to refer to a wide cross-section of the Sinhala-educated population, which included teachers who worked in Sinhala-language schools, white-collar workers, bureaucrats, journalists, Buddhist monks, Ayurvedic physicians, village headmen, and small businessmen.<sup>25</sup> Because this monograph focuses on this demographic group, it enriches the literature concentrated in South Asian studies and ethnomusicology that considers the way the middle class nationalized and classicized music and literature in South Asia in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>26</sup> In this study I subsume processes like nationalization and classicization under the umbrella term of *modernizing*, hence the title *Modernizing Composition*.

I define *modernizing* in this book as the process whereby members of a social group made a particular domain—literature, music, art, law, education, medicine, and so on—contemporary through what they believed to be the most relevant ideologies, methods, themes, and styles. Although I employ the word *modernizing*, I emphasize the idea of making cultural production contemporary, and I reject the term’s association with now-discarded theories of modernization that suggested Westernization was inevitable and all encompassing. It is well known now that modernity and Westernization were never identical.<sup>27</sup>

Because modernizing the composition of song and poetry is the principle theme of this monograph, I must also define what I mean by the concepts of *modern* and *modernity*. Regarding the former, Sheldon Pollock has argued that *modern* and *premodern* are far from the absolute concepts that the terms themselves suggest: European modernity has premodern facets, and premodern South Asian cultural production displays modern features. Nevertheless, Pollock ultimately distinguishes the premodern from the modern based on the historical arrival of practices and theories from European expansion. I believe this is a helpful demarcation, and I consider the songs and poems analyzed in this book to be modern simply because they were created after the onset of colonialism in Sri Lanka.

Regarding modernity, this book could be described in one sentence as “an attempt to understand manifestations of modernity in a colonial and postcolonial society.” It is now well understood that modernity was not a purely Western European process that all societies were destined to undergo. Britain’s modernity is inconceivable without taking into account the countries it colonized. Likewise, India’s modernity is equally as inconceivable without taking into account the material and ideological influence of colonialism.

Thus, many scholars in South Asian studies today accept Sanjay Subrahmanyam's definition, which describes modernity as "a global and conjunctural phenomenon, not a virus that spreads from one place to another. It is located in a series of historical processes [like colonialism] that brought relatively isolated societies into contact."<sup>28</sup> Although I would change the definition to read "a series of historical processes *and power relations* that brought relatively isolated societies into contact," Subrahmanyam provides us with a definition unburdened with Eurocentric assumptions.

Ethnomusicologists today also reject Eurocentric narratives regarding modern musical change. Such narratives were common in scholarship published in the late 1970s and 1980s. At this time scholars described musical traditions as autonomous entities that adapted to or survived the threat of Western impact.<sup>29</sup> This portrayal was a reaction against the earlier contention that non-Western and folk traditions were static systems. In 1976 Daniel Neuman suggested that an ethnomusicology of culture change would need to come to terms with Westernization.<sup>30</sup> In 1980 Neuman contended that the forces of Western modernity possessed the power to shatter tradition.<sup>31</sup> In 1985 Bruno Nettl countered that the spread of Western music created unparalleled diversity in music around the world.<sup>32</sup>

Eurocentric narratives about musical change shifted after ethnomusicologists grappled with scholarship concerning the reinvention of tradition and the field of postcolonial studies. In 2006 Amanda Weidman argued that South Indian classical music was not threatened by Western modernity but reinvented due to efforts of social actors to negotiate colonial modernity.<sup>33</sup> More recently, David Fossum, Rachel Harris, and Katherine Butler Schofield have published case studies that reveal how social actors engaged in canonization processes in Turkmenistan, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, and North India, respectively, before the onset of modernization or European colonialism.<sup>34</sup>

I thus wish to suggest that the problem faced by ethnomusicologists and South Asian studies scholars is no longer a Eurocentric conception of modernity. This monograph is an attempt to steer dialogue in a different direction to address overlooked problems in the historiography of literature and the performing arts. The historiography tends to assume that it is natural to bifurcate the study of musicians and *littérateurs* into the two disciplines of ethnomusicology and South Asian studies. Yet the division of the study of music and literature into two disciplines, I contend, is problematic because it discourages the analysis of the relationship between song and poetry. The themes, imagery, and styles of Sinhala poetry and song developed in similar ways after the onset of gramophone song and the growth of religious, linguistic, and postcolonial nationalism. One thus begins to wonder whether the division of the study of music and literature into two disciplines tends to obscure rather than illuminate.

Perhaps an even more significant problem in the scholarship of contemporary South Asia is the routine failure to account for regions outside of North and South

India and for languages other than major ones, such as English, Tamil, Hindi, Bangla, and Urdu. It is thus easy to find secondary scholarship about North and South Indian classical music, Hindi and Tamil poetry, or Indian literature written in English, but scholarship about song and poetry from countries such as Sri Lanka, the Maldives, or Bhutan is sparse if not completely absent. Because Anglophone South Asian studies has tended to represent South Asia through the lens of North and South India, our understanding of literature and the performing arts throughout twentieth-century South Asia remains inadequate.

One aspect of the regional and linguistic biases in the Anglophone historiography of South Asian literature and the performing arts can be found in the received narrative that modern Indian and Western cultures are “similar but different.” This characterization dominates scholars’ attempts to challenge Eurocentric assumptions. Sumathi Ramaswamy suggests that Tamil-language devotion (*tamilpparru*) is similar to but different from the phenomenon known in English as “linguistic nationalism.”<sup>35</sup> Francesca Orsini argues that the “Hindi public sphere” resembles but differs from the Western European public sphere theorized by Jürgen Habermas.<sup>36</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty asserts that the poetic vision of Rabindranath Tagore drew on “imagination” similar to but different from the imagination of European poets. “Imagination,” Chakrabarty argues, is a “mentalist” and “subject-centered category” inflected with the European thought of Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, David Hume, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Yet Tagore’s imagination in his verse about Mother India is based on *darshan* (divine sight), an idea with no clear correlate in Western thought.<sup>37</sup>

Such studies are important because they challenge Eurocentric assumptions that elide differences between India and the West. Yet they remain inadequate because they tend to center the attention on the dyadic relationship between India and the West. Our understanding of literature and music in twentieth-century South Asia has thus remained somewhat blind to the power relations that existed *within* modern South Asia.

When the middle class in Sri Lanka set out to modernize song and poetry, they did not do so exclusively in relation to the West. Although the Western legacy in Sri Lankan song and poetry was admittedly a factor, Sri Lanka’s geographic proximity to and historical connections with the hegemonic Indian subcontinent assumed increasing significance in the twentieth century. In this monograph I propose an asymmetric triadic model in which Sri Lankan songwriters and poets attempted to create works that responded both to the West and to North India, but more often directly to North India.<sup>38</sup>

Sheldon Pollock’s theory of “cosmopolitan vernacularism” thus holds great relevance for this monograph. Although Pollock reserves the term for the exploration of premodern literature, this study asserts that the concept has relevance for the twentieth century too. Cosmopolitan vernacularism describes how actors deploy

a local language in new ways when they localize literature that is “superposed” and “cosmopolitan.”<sup>39</sup> By “cosmopolitan” Pollock refers to an elite form of culture that travels outside its site of origin. By “superposed” Pollock describes what he identifies as the process of “superposition,” when new local genres develop in reaction to dominating forms of preexistent literature.<sup>40</sup>

South Asian studies scholars and ethnomusicologists of South Asia tend to assume that in twentieth-century South Asia, superposition meant the development of new local genres in response to the impact of cultural production from the colonizing West. In Sri Lanka, however, the West was not the most dominant presence in songwriters’ and poets’ attempts to modernize song and poetry. The majority of Sinhala songs and poems in the twentieth century developed in reaction to North Indian influences. In the early twentieth century, Sinhalese playwrights modeled a new form of local theater (*nurthi*) from North Indian Parsi theater, while Sinhalese songwriters of gramophone song imitated the melodies and short and long syllables of Hindi film songs. In the 1940s a cultural movement (the *Heḷa Havula* movement) was created in opposition to North Indian cultural influence, and also Rabindranath Tagore (the first Indian Nobel laureate) began to impact Sinhala song and poetry. In the 1950s Sinhala songwriters modeled the radio opera on Sanskrit literature and North Indian classical music, while other songwriters adopted the theory of musical nationalism that Professor S. N. Ratanjankar brought to the island from North India.

## RESEARCH

Given the thousands of Sinhala songs and poems that could be excerpted in a study about song and poetry in the twentieth century, one of the biggest challenges was to decide which works to translate and discuss. This book could have been written in an innumerable amount of ways. Thus, the excerpts should not be considered definitive. The excerpts I chose were those that left the greatest impression on me when I conducted research in Sri Lanka during the twenty-four months that passed between June 2009 and June 2011, in December 2014, and when I studied my sources back in the United States.

In Sri Lanka I listened to recordings in the Sri Lankan Broadcasting Corporation’s digital archives and gramophone archives and on compact discs released by SLBC. I also studied the songs as texts printed in compilations of song or Sinhala-language monographs and chapters in edited volumes that analyzed the lives and works of songwriters. Many of the examples of poetry found in this study were accessed in sources at the Sri Lankan National Library. Others I found in edited collections of poetry, such as those edited by P. M. Senarathna and published by Godage and Brothers as part of the book series titled *Colomba Kavi Sanhitā* (Collections of Colombo Poetry).

In addition to these sources, I gleaned insights into the works of song and poetry through interviews conducted with songwriters, poets, scholars, and composers; e-mail correspondences with poets and their family members; discussions with employees at the Sri Lankan Broadcasting Corporation; and conversations with scholars at the University of Colombo, University of Peradeniya, and the University of the Visual and Performing Arts. I also attempted to broaden my knowledge by studying other writings that the songwriters and poets authored in Sinhala newspapers, magazines, literary journals, and books published between 1900 and 1965. These sources I accessed at the Sri Lankan National Archives and the Sri Lankan National Library.

## TWO BASIC PREMISES

In this book I accept Herbert P. Phillips's basic premise that song and poetry are "refractions or distillations, rather than reflections or replicas, of the life and thought of the societies in which they are written." A refraction is a change in direction of a wave due to the particular medium through which it is transmitted. Songs and poems may be considered refractions because they depend as much on the author's social position, biases, and rhetorical motives as on the expectations of audiences and the cultural and historical contexts to which the writing refers. As a result, poets and songwriters create sources that can serve as windows into certain peoples' experiences of history. As Phillips writes about modern literary figures in Thailand, "They entertain or amuse; mobilize public opinion for social action; glorify, beautify, sacralize—and often desacralize—cherished beliefs or institutions; create cynosures for public attention and raise social consciousness; and crystallize new ways of looking at things, although typically what is being looked at is already quite familiar. However, underlying all these contributions is a single noetic purpose: to provide their readers with a codification of the world that is cognitively and aesthetically credible and, in so doing, to define what is right and wrong with the universe, what is consequential, and what should be remembered."<sup>41</sup>

Each social actor discussed in this study sought to accomplish at least one of these objectives and thereby asserted what he believed to be important. During the colonial period, for example, many poets and songwriters attempted to create cynosures for public attention and raised consciousness about the necessity of practicing the local religion and reforming the local language. At the end of the colonial period, which witnessed the commencement of World War II, poets and songwriters turned away from didacticism and entertained readers with romantic themes. In the postcolonial period poets and songwriters crystallized newer ways of looking at experience and sacralized or desacralized tradition by embracing or rejecting local folklore, North Indian culture, and modernist poetry.

Another basic premise of this book is that twentieth-century songwriters, poets, and their works existed within a context simultaneously local, regional, and global. The global features include worldwide events such as World War II and the shift from colonialism to postcolonialism, modular institutions such as radio stations and modern universities, historical processes such as Westernization and Anglicization, and ideologies such as nationalism found throughout the world. The local features of this context comprise phenomena such as domestic politics, Sinhala classical and folk literature, and Sinhala Buddhist religious practices and beliefs, as well as the styles of fellow songwriters and poets from Sri Lanka.

The regional aspects are related primarily to North Indian influences. As discussed earlier, songwriters drew on features of North Indian Parsi theater to fashion a Sinhalese form of musical theater; Sinhala poets and songwriters fell under the spell of Rabindranath Tagore's romanticism; a group of songwriters and poets fought against what they perceived to be the hegemony of North Indian culture; songwriters turned to Sanskrit literature for inspiration; and a North Indian professor impacted songwriters to believe that folklore was the ideal source for modern song. Absences speak as loudly as presences: as Tamil-Sinhalese relations worsened in the mid-twentieth century, Sinhalese songwriters and poets tended not to engage with South Indian culture despite a rich history of Sinhalese-Tamil musical interaction in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Tamil culture had deeply influenced nineteenth-century Sinhala drama (*nāḍagam*) and eighteenth-century Sinhala court song.

#### NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES, BOOK OUTLINE, AND TERMINOLOGY

I employ two narrative techniques in this book: periodization and juxtaposition. Concerning the former, the chapters of this book are organized chronologically, according to the appearance of the primary examples. I am convinced that periodizing is valuable when one wants to explore how what happened in the 1910s and 1920s impacted the trajectory of song and poetry in the 1930s and 1940s, which then influenced the transformation of song and poetry in the 1950s and 1960s. I do not imply that the history of Sinhala song and poetry is a single-stranded chronology, nor do I make teleological assumptions that suggest what happened in chapter 6 was destined to occur because of what happened in chapter 1. But I do hope to highlight how, for example, the members of the Pure Sinhala Fraternity (chapter 2) and the writers of wartime romance (chapter 3) had tired of the poetry and song from the 1910s and 1920s (chapter 1). Periodization, I hope to demonstrate with this monograph, can function as a powerful and still-legitimate method to communicate to readers a sense of history's complicated twists and turns.

This monograph also relies on juxtaposition. Within each chapter I juxtapose works created by songwriters with contemporaneous poems composed by poets. The purpose of my juxtapositions is to explore dramatic similarities or differences that become perceptible when we consider how both groups questioned the norms of their respective art forms in terms of thematic content, imagery, and style and in relation to interrelated local, regional, and global contexts. I hope to show how Sinhalese songwriters and poets in the twentieth century tended to draw influence from the same contexts. Consequently, they either questioned the norms of their respective art forms in similar ways and for similar reasons (chapters 1, 2, 3, 5), or advocated the opposite of the contemporaries (chapter 4).

The book falls into two parts. The three chapters that make up part 1 focus on three movements that came into being in the years before independence in 1948. Chapter 1 analyzes how songwriters and poets encouraged the Sinhalese to return to Buddhism and reject Westernization. Here I attempt to explore an overlooked form of cultural nationalism, one fueled more by capitalism than the desire to cultivate patriotic sentiment or ethnic loyalty. Chapter 2 turns to the songwriters and poets who emphasized the importance of language over religion and launched their attack against North Indian influences. Chapter 3 centers on a school of songwriters and poets who rejected didacticism and sought to entertain their readers through works that engaged with Bengali, English, and French literature about romance.

Part 2 moves on to the songwriters and poets who rose to prominence after independence. They fashioned works for a country with a new complexion: sovereign and ruled by Sinhalese Buddhists. Chapter 4 investigates the emergence of two new genres that aimed to restore a measure of authenticity to Sinhala song and poetry through what I describe as *neoclassical* and *modernist* aesthetics, respectively. Chapter 5 turns to the way one songwriter and one poet asserted that the authentic culture of the Sri Lankan nation was rural folklore. Finally, chapter 6 details a stylistic volte-face of a poet-songwriter who aimed to transport readers to imaginary realms but later became disillusioned with art for art's sake and requested readers to disavow ethnic nationalism.

Some scholars may take issue with my use of the terms *neoclassical* or *modernist*. Perhaps they believe that such European terms should not be used to discuss Sri Lankan cultural forms. They may endorse the view, long championed by ethnomusicologists, that scholars should study local terminology in depth and avoid reducing these concepts to European terms. I too endorse this view, but with restraint. The problem is when scholars take this to an extreme and argue that ethnomusicologists should describe South Asian cultural formations only in South Asian cultural terms. This outlook in Anglophone studies, as David Washbrook contends, assumes the existence of an ahistorical and essentialist otherness in the consciousness of non-European peoples. Such an outlook wrongly assumes that this otherness lies beyond the conjunctural conditions of modernity and provides

the basis for “non-Western” cultures and societies.<sup>42</sup> Scholars endorsing such ideologies too easily forget that colonial modernity involved a series of historical processes and power relations that brought relatively isolated societies into a serious and ongoing engagement with modernism, cultural nationalism, and neoclassicism. I thus believe my use of these terms is appropriate. For example, I use the term *modernism* in chapter 4 to describe the verse composed by Sinhala poets such as Siri Gunasinghe, who measured themselves against the standards of excellence championed by modernist poets such as T. S. Eliot and Robert Frost.

Further, scholars who believe that the terms *modernism* and *romanticism* should not be applied to South Asian culture have failed to take note that a consensus is growing among scholars of modern Indian literature that the thematic development of Hindi, Urdu, and Bangla poetry was consistent to a considerable extent. I use the term *consistent* to refer to the transitions between 1900 and 1960 from didacticism to romanticism to modernism and social realism.<sup>43</sup> This monograph attempts to build on this consensus by revealing that as far south as Sri Lanka, Sinhala-language poetry developed along a comparable trajectory. To bear out this argument I first explore the didacticism of Ananda Rajakaruna (chapter 1) and Rapiyel Tennakoon (chapter 2). Then I analyze the romanticism of P. B. Alwis Perera and his colleagues (chapter 3). Finally, I turn to the modernism or social realism of Siri Gunasinghe (chapter 4), Gunadasa Amarasekera (chapter 5), and Mahagama Sekera (chapter 6).

Some may disapprove of the term *composition* in the book's title because it evokes Western musicology's traditional focus on the analysis of musical scores. Yet, in my judgment, the term nicely refers to the creation of both poetry and song. Today the fields of ethnomusicology and musicology share many topics and goals. I therefore see no reason to shy away from evoking a topic that is also central to Western musicology. I hope musicologists take interest in this study and adopt similar methodological approaches to Western poetry and song.

## THE SPECTER OF THE CIVIL WAR

Scholarship regarding twentieth-century Sri Lanka has tended to focus on Sinhala Buddhism, politics, nationalism, violence, and the civil war (1983–2009). Readers who know Sri Lanka only as the site of ethnic conflict may expect this monograph to draw connections between the civil war and the primary sources discussed in this monograph—Sinhala song and poetry produced between 1903 and 1964. These sources, however, in my opinion, do not foreshadow that Sinhalese mobs would later commit terrifying acts of violence against Tamils in 1977 and 1983, acts that deepened the ethnic polarization and triggered the separatist desire to carve out a separate Tamil state. From my perspective it would be most appropriate to make conjectures about the specter of the civil war in a study of Sinhala song and poetry created in the 1970s and 1980s.



PART ONE

# The Colonial Era

