

Magul Bera : Ceremonial Drum Music of Sri Lanka

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All nations play drums. Some people use drums for dancing while some use them for music alone. Yet some use drums to invoke divine power. There are societies where drums are used as talking instruments. In Sri Lanka drums play an important role in dancing and since recently drums are taken for art music as well. Historical annals show that there has been sixty drum types, and most of them have been used in war fare. The tradition in Sri Lanka is that of hard drum play, as an open-air demonstration.

Bera is the common term used to mean drum. The term is derived from Sanskrit "*Bheri*" meaning drum. *Magul* is a local connotation meaning ceremonial. Thus *Magul-bera* should mean ceremonial drum, but is commonly understood as Ceremonial Drum Music. Although the term bera is used to mean the drum instrument, in the present context it is used to mean the music played on the drum. Like-wise we have Ana-bera meaning proclamation music, *Mini bera* for funeral music, Atyâ bera for a style found in the ritual and so on. On the contrary, the type of the drum instrument too is discerned in instances like *Yak-bera*, *Gäta-bera*, *Panā-bera* etc. Here it refers to the instrument.

Thus, the term has to be understood in both ways according to the contexts. But one thing should be clear. that there is no instrument called *Magul-bera*, which has to mean a type of music played on the drum.

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Magul-bera can be played on any of the three provincial drums, the *Gäta-bera* of the *Kandyan* school, *Yak-bera* of Southern Lanka and the *Davula*, the drum of Sabaragamuwe region.

The style of the *Gäta-bera* has emerged from *Kohomba Kankariya* ritual. This drum is tapering on the sides. It is the bulk in the center that has given its name... *Gäta-bera* it is like a not ... *Geta* in a rope. Cattle skin is use for left drum face and monkey skin to the right. The drum measures 27 inches across with faces having 5-6 inches diameter.

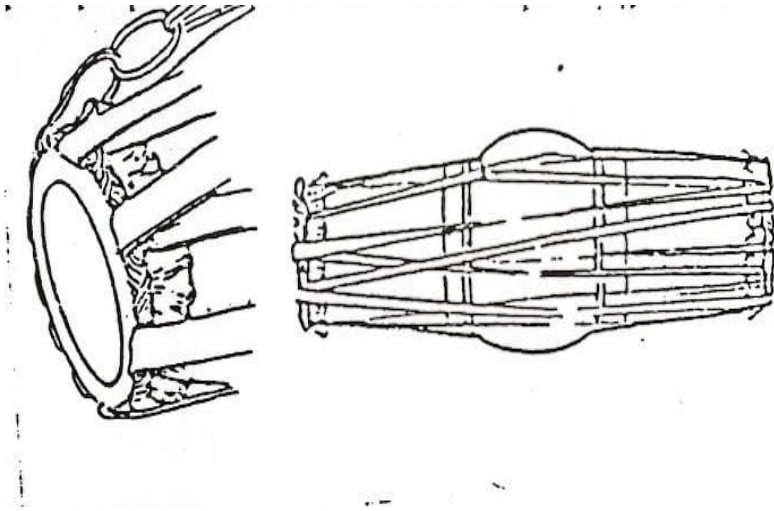


Figure 1 : Geta Beraya

In tradition the measurement is calculated as *Theviat Thunnaṅgul*, i.e. three spans and three finger breadths. *Theviat Thunnaṅgul* should vary according to the individual who gives the finger spans. This is actually what is required. The drum should fit in to the hands of the player.

The measurements are almost the same in the Low Country *Yak bera*. The bladder skin of cattle is taken for the parchment of *Yak bera*. The most preferable wood for the *Gäta-bera* is *Esala* or *Kohomba* (i.e. Margossa). At times even Jack wood is used for the *Yak bera* the best is the *Kitul*. *Yak - bera* is perfectly cylindrical. It gives a dronal sound that can easily be toned down for micro phone recordings.

The other drum in question is the *Davula*, the drum of Sabaragamuwe. It is barreled shaped with much broader faces. The goat skin is taken as the parchment here. *Davula* is shorter in length, about 20 inches across. This is an old drum in Sri Lanka, and today it is the main instrument used for *Hewisi*, music of the Buddhist temple. *Davula* has gained popularity as the drum of Sabaragamuwe region, because it is used mainly for the services of God Saman, God of Adams Peak, who reigns over Sabaragamuwe region. *Davula* is played with a stick on one side and the hand on the other side. But when playing *Magul-bera* hands are used on both sides.

Magul-bera is more associated with the *Kandyän Gäta-bera*, and the Low country *Yak-bera*, the two drums that speak much of the theory in drum play. Yet the oldest and coveted traditions are found in the style of the *Davula*. *Magul-bera* is a narration type of drum play devoid of the cyclic concept of *Tala* as found in India. It is strange that Sri Lanka, being at the Southern tip of the great Indian sub-continent, has developed its own independent style of drum music. This cyclic pattern is maintained only when the drum is played for singing. But when the artistes are expected to give drum demonstrations they never stick to the cycle, instead they play rhythm with a few cycles interspersed here and there. The reason for this feature in *Sinhala* drum music may be due to the fact that, in Sri Lanka drums are played mainly for dancing and the styles have been theorized on dancing and not on poetic meters as found in India.

This phrase could be measured to hold 32 *matras*, i.e. music instants, by taking every syllable by syllable. Thus 'ta ri ki ta ' should take 4 *matras*. But it could also be measured to hold 8 *matras* as well. Then the problem will arise when the speed of the piece will start slowing down as found in the subsequent phrase....

(b) *tarikita kundak kundak gajjin -2*

tarikita kundak kundak ga. ji ...ji .. ga.. ta.

(c) *kunda kun dak jin, takun takun jin jin gaj jin*

Drummers say that there is the *tita*, ictus, but not the cycle, the *awarta*, i.e. metre. Musicians face the difficulty of transcribing *Magul-bera* rhythm with the Indian style of notation, which moves in cycles. All drum work in India take the cycle with a clear *awarta*. Because of the lack of this feature no clapping at regular intervals is possible with *Magul-bera* of Sri Lanka. Let us go to the other steps.

(d) *takuṇḍak jin jin, takuṇḍak jin jin, takundak jin jin*

taku taka jin jin, taku taka jin jin, taku taka jin jin

taku taka jiku taka, taku taka jiku taka, taku taka

(e) *kuṇḍa kuṇḍa kuṇḍa kuṇḍa kuṇḍa kuṇḍa kuṇḍa*

(f) *rrung....rungg..rungg.jin kunda gau tak jin jin*

kun jin kun jin kun jinand so on.

Parts (e) and (f) take beautiful rhythmic styles of speeding up and slowing down. Part (e) is a roll whereas in (f) *rrung..*is repeated thrice with gaps. The style of *Magul-bera* in Low country drum is still diffusing, but beautiful. A small interval of one and half or two tones can be discerned from syllables like *gum, din, dom, dehin, gat* etc.

This is how the first *Wattama* starts. There are a few style variations distributed in the country. This is *Magul-bera* in the Low Country cylindrical drum. The starting syllable *dehin* is repeated a number of times, while gaining speed gradually. According to the following demonstration made by Mr. Karunāratne Bandara, *dehin* is followed by a beautiful roll taken on the ring syllable.

dehin, dehin, dehin, dehin dehin dehin dehin,
rrrrrrrrrrrt..... regadita gata, gugūṇḍita gata,
gugundak gata guṇḍak dehin, guṇḍak gundak
dehin, gundak guṇḍak dehin, guṇḍak guṇḍak dehin,
guṇḍak guṇḍak gatigata guṇḍak dehin,
gundak guṇḍak gatigata gundak dehin
gatigata, guṇḍak gatigata, guṇḍak gatigata,
guhḍak gatigata, guṇḍak gatigata,
gunda gatigata, gunda gatigata
gundak dehin dom //

This part is almost homogenous in the country, excepting for the fact that the starting syllable *dehin* may take a few more repetitions at times. Some drummers limit it to only three this repetitions.

Here is the next portion of *Magul-bera* played by the same drummer.

rrrrrrrrrrrr...rin din gatigata gatak, don don
gattak degatak, don don tak, don tak don tak,
donta guṇḍanta gatanta guṇḍagadin, gata
guguṇḍita gugūṇḍita gata gutḍak dehin,

dehinta gadita gadita gatam }
dehinta gadita gundita gatam}.: first cycle

This first part of *Magul-bera* can be compared with the style played by Sandoris Jayantha of the Broadcasting Corporation orchestra.

dehin. dehin, dehin, dehin dehin dehin dehin

*rrrrrrrrrr ...e gadita gata gugundita gata
gugundak gata gundak dehin, gundan gundan
dehin, gundan gundan dehin, gundan gundan
dehin, gundan gundan gadigata gundan dehin,
gundan gundan gadigata gundan dehin,
gundan gundan gadigata, gundan gadigata,
gunda gadigata gundan gata gugunda gata
gadi gunda gatak dehin ta dom/*

*rrrrrrrrrrrrr..unda gunda gunda gadi gata gunda
dehin degata dehinta gat, runda gunda gunda
gatigata gunda dehin degata dehinta gat,
gatigata gunda gaddirikita gatam, gatigata gunda
gundirikita gatam, gaddirikita gatam gundak
dehin dom/*

*dehinta gadita gadita gatam
degata gundita gundita gatam
dehinta gadita gadita gatam
degata gunda gunda gundam / dom*

The remaining part of this *Magul-bera* piece is about three times this length. It takes a few more short cycles here and there. Anyhow the drummers can extend the playing as they wish by making additional elaborations. On the next page is the Spectrum image of the distribution of dehin syllable. It shows the gradual gaining of speed. The Sinhala *Magul-bera* play is one of the beautiful drum pieces found in the

traditions of Asia.

Especially the Yak-bera style is unique with its abrupt endings and free rhythmic rolls.

Referance

Cut 1. ---S.L.B.C. LP.Disc on Folk, Music of Sri Lanka. *Magul-bera* by Sandoris Jayanta.

Music Research Unit recording of *Magul-bera* played by Mr.Karunaratne Bandara.

Cut 2.-- S.L.B.C. L.P. Disc on Folk Music of Sri Lanka. *Magul-bera, Kandyan style* by Ransiri Telkumuduwela.

Music Research Unit recording of Kandyan *Magul-bera*.spoken ,by Dhanapala Owitigala

Kandyan style *Magul-bera* recorded in *Kohomba Kankariya* recording done at Nugawela.

Magul-bera recordings made by the S.L.B.C. Music Research Unit.

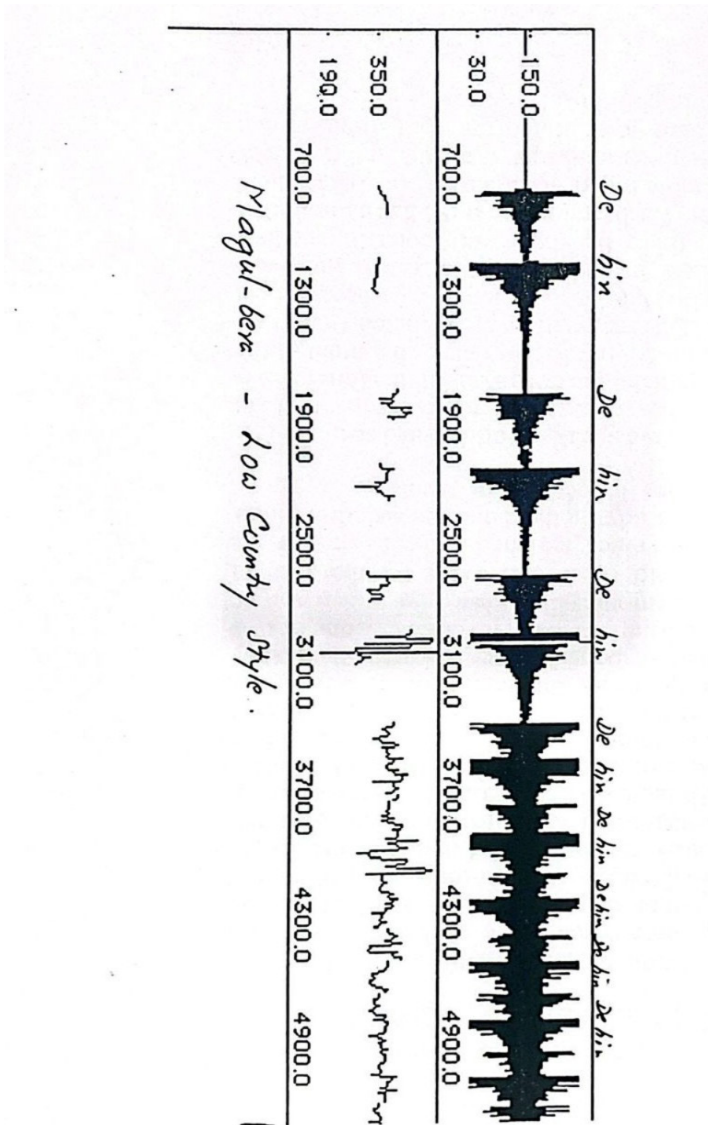


Chart 01 - Magul Bera, Low Country Style