

## UNESCO RILA: The sounds of integration Episode 52: Sustaining Support for Intangible Cultural Heritage (12/07/2023)

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### **Dr Gameli Tordzro**

welcome to the podcast series of the UNESCO Chair in Refugee Integration through Languages and the Arts. We bring you sounds to engage with you and invite you to think with us.

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### **Dr Hyab Yohannes**

Welcome to Sounds of Integration podcast. My name is Hyab Yohannes and I'm a Research Associate and Academic Coordinator for Cultures of Sustainable and Inclusive Peace Network+. I'm also a team member of the UNESCO Chair of Refugee Integration through Languages and the Arts. Welcome to this episode of the Sounds of Good Books series where we delve into fascinating topic of intangible cultural heritage and its preservation. In this episode, we are privileged to have a special guest, Professor Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya, who has worked extensively with Afro Sri Lankan community in Sirambiyadiya village. We will explore the African heritage of this community and their unique cultural practices, including the *manja* performance. Professor Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya will also share insight into other Afro descendants in Sri Lanka and what this community tells us about the Indian Ocean slave trade. Join us for an insightful discussion on the preservation of intangible cultural heritage and the unique practices of Afro-Sri Lankan community. Welcome and thank you for joining us today, Professor Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya. As an introduction, would you kindly tell us who you are and what you do?

### **Prof Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya**

Thank you, Hyab. I'm a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in the University of London. I'm also at the University of Cambridge, Senior Associate at Lucy Cavendish College and a Lecturer in the Faculty of History. And I combine research with teaching and was a Visiting Professor at the Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto in the Faculty of International Relations. I was a member of the UNESCO Slave Route Project in Paris for four years and was its Rapporteur for two years. And a few years ago, I presented a paper at a conference organised by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva as an Expert on Afro-descendants in Asia. My research concerns Indian Ocean commerce, migration and cultural exchange and I have published six monographs, co-authored one book, edited four books and seven special issues of academic journals. My work ranges from linguistics, history, ethnomusicology to literature. So I work on manuscripts and also conduct fieldwork on language and music. I have produced four ethnographic films which I screen to illustrate my lectures. I also convene conferences and symposia and of course edit chapters and articles for the books and special volumes of the academic journals that I produced. My new role as Chair of the National Scientific Committee on Intangible Cultural Heritage of ICOMOS Sri Lanka is also shaping my current projects.

**Dr Hyab Yohannes**

Thank you, Professor Shihan de Silva. Yeah, I had also the privilege of reading some of your chapters, and that was really interesting. So if I may ask you, you've worked with Afro-Sri Lankan community in Sirambiyadiya. What attracted you to this research and why that particular community?

**Prof Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya**

Yes, for my doctoral research I was collecting data on Creolised Portuguese. And Sirambiyadiya village is one of the last strongholds where the language survives and now it survives mainly in song. Although I approached this community as a linguist, I was enthralled by their music making. I am trained in the Western tradition of music and have read piano scores since I was five years old and I play to illustrate my lectures and also perform at concerts, both by reading scores and by ear. But this community's way of music making was so different, learned through an oral tradition and combining homemade music instruments with a few drums that they have been gifted. How traditions survive on the margins of society was attractive. Why do communities hold on to traditions that have no obvious economic benefits is also intriguing.

**Dr Hyab Yohannes**

Indeed, it is intriguing. How do you think is the African heritage of the Afro-Sri Lankan community manifested?

**Prof Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya**

The African heritage of the Sirambiyadiya community can be seen through a song dance performance, which they call *manja*. The community has adapted in Diaspora and are indigenised now. The *manja* performance pulls them apart from all other Sri Lankans. A few years ago, there are relatives who live a few miles north from the Sirambiyadiya village in a place called Kalpitiya. They also started to perform *manja*. Sometimes the two communities perform in public together.

**Dr Hyab Yohannes**

If I may ask, can you also tell us about how the book Sustainable Support for Intangible Cultural Heritage came about?

**Prof Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya**

The book actually follows a conference that I convened at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in London at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Mariana Pereira, Lena Dominelli, Bilinda Nandadeva, Beheroze Shroff, Chapane Mutiua, Gregory Hansen, Ritu Sethi, Cheryl Toman and I developed our presentations into chapters over about a period of a year after the conference and those chapters form the book which I co-edited with Mariana Pereira and Gregory Hansen. So the chapters concern India, Gabon, Mozambique, Sri Lanka, UK and USA. Half the book is on folklore and the book was nominated for the Katherine Briggs Award. And this conference actually follows the screening of my film, Indian Ocean Memories African Migrants, which I have screened in several countries, in Austria, in Britain, Germany, Japan, Seychelles, Sri Lanka, Switzerland, and Netherlands. And the presence of the UNESCO facilitators on intangible cultural heritage at a screening organised in Colombo at the Social Scientist Association prompted me to convene the conference in London.

**Dr Hyab Yohannes**

Thank you. If I may take you a little bit back as well, can you describe what *manja* performance is?

**Prof Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya**

*Manja* actually is a collective performance and the format is typically African with call and response. The lead singer plays two coconut shell halves on a wooden plank and sets the rhythm and the others respond. Verses are short and repetitive. At the shout of *machete*, the singing stops. Then the dancing begins. The music gets faster and faster and louder and reaches a climax and ends abruptly with the dance also stopping. This community don't play any African instruments as descendants of forced migrants who were not allowed to take any of their belongings. They don't have any African instruments. All they carried is their sense of rhythm and their cultural memories. Their music is polyrhythmic, meaning each musician is playing a different rhythm. And there are many timbres that they create with diverse instruments, which means a variety of tone qualities is produced. The instruments that they have are a combination of local drums given to them: One of the drums is called *dole*. It's a cylindrical drum with two heads beaten by the two hands. And the other drum is a *rabana*, a round handheld drum beaten with the palm and fingers. And the other homemade percussion instruments are a metal coin beaten against an empty glass, two metal spoons beaten together and of course the two coconut shell halves beaten on a wooden plank which is the main rhythm instrument.

[MANJA MUSIC]

**Dr Hyab Yohannes**

In some of your reading, in some of your work as well, I read that you coined the concept of dual heritage, African and Portuguese for *manja*. What does it mean and how does it help us understand *manja* performance you just described?

**Prof Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya**

Yes, I have actually been thinking about their identity and heritage. But this *manja* performance doesn't represent a single inheritance. The song and dance is African, but the words of most of the songs are in Creole Portuguese, which the community call our language, even though the language has gone into disuse in the spoken form. And that helps us to view *manja* as a dynamic performance which is adapted in the process of migration in diaspora and during the process of indigenisation, they've lived in the country for hundreds of years. Survival of *manja* is due to its adaptability and the community's resourcefulness.

**Dr Hyab Yohannes**

That's very interesting how cultures travel and how performances like *manja* travel from one end of the world to the other end of the world. And if I may ask you as well, how has cultural tourism affected the *manja* performance? and if so, how? And also how has it changed through these histories of migration and travelling and moving from place to place?

**Prof Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya**

Yeah, Sirambiyadiya village fortunately is off the beaten track and it has escaped cultural tourism, but scholars from all over the world, journalists and some travellers visited them.

There is interest in the community in the context of searching for lost African diasporas by the African Union, for example, and the United Nations. The community have balanced this external interest on them very carefully and have maintained the authenticity of the performance. They don't compose any new *manjas*. They only sing the *manjas* that have been handed down to them by their African ancestors. And they say their knowledge of Portuguese isn't now good enough for them to compose new *manjas*. But moving *manja* onto the stage, because one of our previous Presidents, President Ranasinghe Premadasa, was the first to take an interest in them and bring them to cultural festivals. And that exposed them to the public and they do perform on stage now. And that does alter the presentation, the emotion, the costume and the choreography.

**Dr Hyab Yohannes**

You also spoke about sustainability of *manja*. How does the community raise sustainability of *manja* self?

**Prof Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya**

At present, the occasional invitations that the community receive to perform, bring in extra income for the community. The community don't have... they're not IT literate and they don't have IT equipment. They don't have a website. They only have a few mobile phones. They are out of the entertainment market. Children, they include in their practice sessions. But they're not sure how the performance might be altered by future generations. There is also some concern that out marriage is the norm and that could also dilute their performance. And that concern about losing what they call their only heritage, inherited from their ancestors. They need to be empowered. Being an oral tradition, the words of the songs are in urgent need of being recorded and transcribed. Revitalisation of a critically endangered language, encapsulated in the lyrics of *manja*, is a priority for researchers in ethnomusicology and linguistics.

**Dr Hyab Yohannes**

You remind me actually of Mbembe's description that music is a sign of life, in life denying circumstances. And if I may continue to ask you on that note as well, do you think there are other Afro descendants in Sri Lanka?

**Prof Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya**

Yes, in 2009, after the civil war was over, I went to the East Coast in Trincomalee, where I interviewed two elderly Afro descendants. There are other Afro descendants actually in the Puttalam district outside the village of Sirambiyadiya itself. and there are Afro descendants in other districts nearby and elsewhere. But altogether they are not very numerous and they have out married and integrated to this multi-ethnic patchwork of Sri Lanka. We need to rely on self-identification in such cases because officially the father's ethnicity is what determines the child's ethnicity. If an Afro-descendant woman marries a, say, a Sinhalese man, the child would officially be Sinhalese.

**Dr Hyab Yohannes**

And what do you think this tells us about the Indian Ocean slave trade?

**Prof Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya**

*Manja* was missing from colonial narratives and that means the community continued their cultural production by hiding it from their colonial patrons. Their conversion to Roman Catholicism has not disrupted the continuity of *manja*. *Manja* is not a syncretic performance where Christianity and African traditions are mixed. Typically, they attend mass in the church on a Sunday morning and on Sunday afternoon, they get together and sing *manja* in their compound. They have been able to navigate two traditions successfully. And *manja* shows how their ancestors forced African migrants, did not cut off their links with Africa altogether in diaspora. Their cultural memories and embodied performances continued through the generations in diaspora. The Portuguese lyrics show how they adapted to their host land linguistically because Portuguese or Creolised Portuguese was a lingua franca of Sri Lanka, even during the initial phase of British rule of the island. This community represents the last phase of Indian Ocean slave trade. Their oral history says that they were brought to Sri Lanka by the British in the early 19th century. And that's quite interesting because that's when abolition was occurring in the Atlantic Ocean. As transatlantic slave trade was being abolished, one hopes that it would spill over into the Indian Ocean, but the spilling over was a slow process, so the Indian Ocean slave trade was continuing. And they remind us of the continuation of the trade, the delay, the lag time in abolition happening in the Indian Ocean.

**Dr Hyab Yohannes**

That gives us a lot of food for thought. Shihan, thank you so much for being with us today. For our listeners, if you would like to know more about Shihan and her work, you can find the link in the show notes. See you all in two weeks for our next episode.

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**Dr Gameli Tordzro**

Thank you for listening to the podcast of the UNESCO Chair in Refugee Integration through Languages and Arts, a podcast series to make you think. More information about our work can be found on the website of the University of Glasgow [www.gla.ac.uk](http://www.gla.ac.uk).

Thank you very much.

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