

Contested spaces: Sinhala ethnicity and Sri Lankan identity in post 1998 Sri Lankan Contemporary Popular Song (98+SLCPS)

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This paper explores Sinhala ethnicity and Sri Lankan identity in terms of the conflict between the Sinhala language based homogeneous identity by which they are typically considered and the ‘heterogeneously homogeneous’ identity of a Sri Lankan essentially Sinhala ethnic phenomenon; post 1998 Sri Lankan Contemporary Popular Song, the country’s most robust and popular category of music today (henceforth 98+SLCPS). Representing over 70% of Sri Lanka’s gross population, Sinhala ethnicity is typically regarded the ideological core of Sri Lankan identity. Crucially the identity of Sinhala ethnicity pivots on the Sinhala language and therefore evokes a strong (Sinhala language based) homogeneity. That the language is considered the ‘mother tongue’ of Sri Lanka’s Sinhala ethnicity is the principle reason for this linguistic basis of Sinhala ethnicity. By implication, Sri Lankan identity elicits a similar homogeneity apparent in a Sinhala language based ethnic ideology that underlies a vast spectrum of socio-political and academic projections of Sri Lankan identity

What determines 98+SLCPS a Sinhala Sri Lankan phenomenon is its artists and audience. Combined, they constitute a Community of Practice (CofP) in terms of Wenger’s (1998) definition of the concept and are essentially Sri Lankan youth of Sinhala ethnicity (representing approx. 70% of the country’s youth). Consequently, 98+SLCPS is rendered a ‘Sinhala’ Sri Lankan phenomenon. However, unlike the homogeneity ascribed to Sinhala ethnicity and Sri Lankan identity, 98+SLCPS elicits an identity that is simultaneously homogeneous *and* heterogeneous. This identity corresponds to two complementary profiles of 98+SLCPS: its ‘socio-cultural’ and ‘structural’ profiles. The former embodies the societal position of 98+SLCPS and the way it is negotiated by its CofP. The ‘structural’ profile of 98+SLCPS issues from the conjunction of the distinguishing (linguistic and musical) attributes of 98+SLCPS songs: each song contains the blend of languages/language varieties, particularly English and Sinhala with diverse musical styles.

Commencing with a brief overview of 98+SLCPS and its CofP, the paper then summarises the Sinhala language based homogeneity attributed to Sinhala ethnicity and Sri Lankan identity together with reference to some socio-political and academic contexts in which the assumption is visible. The socio-cultural profile of 98+SLCPS and eclectic blend of cues ranging from interviews with artists to naming practices that inform it are then outlined. Next, a brief description of the structural constraints governing the songs advances the structural profile of 98+SLCPS leading to the central focus of this paper: debating Sinhala ethnicity and Sri Lankan identity in light of their mutual ascribed homogeneous identity and the heterogeneous-homogeneity of 98+SLCPS.

References

Wenger, Etienne. (1998) *Communities of Practice; Learning, Meaning and Identity*. CUP.

Subject affiliations: Language and Identity (particularly in music), Global Englishes