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**Vannama: A Sri Lankan Cultural Product with Roots in
Majority Sinhala and Minority Tamil Cultural Practices**

Anthropologist Stanley Tambiah once famously characterized the Sinhalese population in Sri Lanka as a “majority with a minority complex,” given that Sinhalese policymakers often behave as if they are constantly under threat. Such defensiveness is also evident in discourse about the genre of dance music known as vannama; Sinhalese nationalist scholars have gone to great lengths to argue that Sinhala-language vannamas are not derivative of music of the Tamil minority. Today, Sinhala vannamas have come to represent Sri Lankan cultural heritage on the world stage.

This paper compares Sinhala vannama compositions with similarly structured Tamil-language compositions, uncovering and analyzing likely points of historical contact. While Sinhala vannamas were appropriated from lower caste Sinhalese ritualists in the 1940s to be rebranded as gentrified national culture, I suggest that the practice of singing vannama verses in Sinhala began in the eighteenth century when Sinhalese poets drew on Tamil forms of versification linked to the royal palace—displaying an assimilation of influences rather than direct borrowing. I also use vannamas as a lens to explore how the relationship between majority Sinhalese and minority Tamil cultures in Sri Lanka has changed over the past two centuries.

Bio

Eshanta Peiris teaches history and analysis of various global musics at Vancouver Community College in Canada. He is co-chair of the South Asia Performing Arts Section of the Society of Ethnomusicology and is managing editor of the *Analytical Approaches to World Musics* journal.