Parai mēlam music in Jaffna Tamil culture, Sri Lanka: an ethnomusicological study

Sanmugeswaran Pathmanesan[1]

[1]Department of Anthropology, University of Kentucky, U.S.A
spsa223@g.uku.edu

Abstract

Parai mēlam (a double-headed cylindrical drum played with two sticks) music occupies a significant position in Jaffna Tamil culture, Sri Lanka. This is an area which is worthy of scrutiny with regard to its emergence, development, uniqueness, position, performance, changes and continuity. In world drum tradition, *parai mēlam* music tradition has a long historical explanation, but unfortunately this performing art has become a diminishing culture due to various factors. These factors vary in the context of caste, culture and religious, rituals which are key spheres of Jaffna Tamil culture. The major objective of this study is to examine the position and placement of *parai mēlam* music in Tamil culture in the context of changing modern society, what are the structural and cultural consensus for making auspiciousness and inauspiciousness, and how the music rhythms are created, performed, taught, preserved, sustained, and continued? Methodologically, ethnographic research methods including ethnomusicological perspectives and methods have been employed in this study.

Keywords: Parai mēlam music, ethnomusicology, Jaffna Tamil culture, caste, and rituals

Introduction

Parai mēlam (a double headed cylindrical drum played with two sticks) music is, being occupied a significant position in Jaffna Tamil culture, not discussed much ethnomusicologically and anthropologically in the context of Sri Lanka, though it has been contributed immense contribution to the funeral ritual, religious rituals, and the Tamil music culture. *Parai* is an ancient percussion instrument that was played at temple festivals and funerals. This is an area which is worthy of scrutiny with regard to its emergence, development, uniqueness, position, performance, changes and continuity (Valarmathi, 2009). In world drum tradition, *parai mēlam* music tradition has a long historical explanation, but unfortunately this performing art has become a diminishing culture due to various factors. These factors vary in the context of caste, culture and religious, rituals which are key spheres of Jaffna Tamil culture (Sivathamby 2000, 1995).

By exploring the emergence and development of *parai mēlam* music, it brings to light a rich literature background, together with historical significance and the vital role of this percussion instrument in ancient Tamil culture. Furthermore, as this music culture represents the notions of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness, this study further intends to explore anthropologically. Symbolic and cultural expressions of *parai mēlam* are most significant in caste and religious contexts. Though auspiciousness includes Hindu religious pantheon and rituals, performing arts and other fields of music, there is an ambiguity in the notion of auspiciousness while *periya mēlam* music is dominantly mandatory for auspiciousness in the Hindu pantheon of Jaffna.

Due to castetism, ritual pollution (Dumont, 1980; Douglas, 2002 [1966]) and superior consciousness of *pēriya mēlam* music and *karnatic* music (Terada, 2005) this tradition and performers (*paraiyar* community) are seen untouchables and their music untouchable too, but this performance is mandatory for high-caste funeral rites. One of the senior performers (one of my informants) in Jaffna told me that "now our people reluctant to learn this instrument; in particular, the parents do not encourage children to learn this music or become a performer, and parents encourage their children to educate and join in the government service, because the parents and children do not want to continue their occupation (drum player) as it creates low status of identity in the society."

With regard to the auspiciousness and inauspiciousness of this music, there are some drumming rhythms that are identified as inauspiciousness as they are associated with funeral observances. Though auspiciousness includes Hindu religious pantheon (Terada, 2005) and rituals, performing arts and other fields of music (Jeyakantha, 2005), there is an ambiguity in the notion of auspiciousness while *periya mēlam* (music of *thavil* and *nāthaswaram*) [1] music is dominantly mandatory for auspiciousness in the Hindu pantheon (Terada, 2005). Seemingly, there are some drumming rhythms that are identified as inauspiciousness as they are associated with funeral observances. Basically, in Jaffna, *parai mēlam* music is identified as inauspiciousness as it is, in particular, commonly performed for funeral ritual of high castes in Jaffna Peninsula. However, *parai mēlam* performers are from the *paraiyar* caste community, which is from the *panchamar*[2] caste category of caste base social organization in Jaffna.

"Structural replication" and "downward displacement" (McGilvray, 1983) and "pollution" and "purity" (Dumont, 1980) have characterized the nature of inauspiciousness of *parai mēlam* music and performers. With respect to performing this music, performance is varied due to the regional differences, application of rhythms, improvisation, religious and non-religious contexts. Though *parai mēlam* music tradition has a long historical explanation, unfortunately this performing art has become a diminishing culture due to various factors. These factors vary in the context of caste, culture and religious, rituals which are key spheres of Jaffna Tamil culture.

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[1] *Periya mēlam* ensemble consists of four types of instruments:
nāthaswaram (a double-reed aero phone), *thavil* (the double headed drum), *tālam* (a set of two small hand cymbals) and *sruti petti* (the free instrument to provide the drone). See also, Yoshitaka Terada, Performing Auspiciousness: *Periya mēlam* in South Indian Marriage Ceremony.
[2] *Panchama*r includes five low castes namely *ampattar* (barbers), *paraiyar* (drum beaters), *pallar* (labors), *nalavar* (toddy tapers and labors), and *vannan* (washerman) are treated as untouchables in Tamil caste culture in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, see also K. Daniel (1982) *Panchama*r.

Aims

To study the position and placement of *parai mēlam* music in Tamil culture in the context of changing modern Jaffna Tamil Hindu society, what are the structural and cultural consensus for making auspiciousness and inauspiciousness?

Methods

Methodologically, this study is an empirical one and I have used ethnographic research methods such as participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and key-informant interviews. Also, the ethnomusicological perspectives and methods were employed in this study, which derived qualitative data from the fieldwork conducted among the *paraiyar* community at different villages in Jaffna. Participant observation, key informant interviews and case study methods were used in order to assess the peculiarity and uniqueness of the music and life tradition of a particular caste in Tamil culture. In addition, extensive secondary information was also utilized

Results

An ethnomusicological study of *parai mēlam* music is a valuable contribution to the development of Tamil musicology because existing literature has stressed the lack of research in this musical tradition. Moreover, it demonstrates the similarities and differences between *parai mēlam* and other drum musical traditions in the world. In order to further this music, documentation, innovation, comparison with other drum instruments and making improvisation and introducing as a discipline in a performing art school are needed to be done for its furtherance.

Parai mēlam is identified as an ancient Tamil music instrument, which is dated back to Sangam period (300 BCE - 300 CE). The *parai* was used, as a communication instrument, to announce important messages to people during the *Chēra, Chōla*, and *Pāndiya* dynasties periods; at the same time, it was also played at weddings, rituals, and temples. In Sri Lanka, *parai* drum is played by *paraiyar*, thus, drumming castes are known as the *paraiyar*. In addition, *paraiyar* are in the low strata of the caste hierarchy in Jaffna. They provide domestic service to the high caste *vellālar*; thus, *paraiyar* were dealing with

cremation activities, cleaning activities (mensuration and toilet cleaning) and providing music service for funeral.

In particular, as they involve in polluting activities, they were not allowed to enter the temple by of high castes of Brahmins and *vellālar* in Jaffna. Further, as *paraiyar* provided music service for funeral of high caste people in Jaffna, their ritual service was considered an inauspicious ritual service. Therefore, both *parai mēlum* and *parai mēlum* music are dishonored as impure. Thus, *parai* percussion instrument became an identity of *paraiyar* community.

With regard to *parai* performance, *parai mēlum* music is performed in different contexts such as funeral and temple rituals. Furthermore, these two contexts create different spaces which construct different status for this music. Although this music possesses these different kinds of uniqueness, *parai melum* is perceived as a funeral drum (*setha vēdu mēlum*) rather than temple *mēlum*. In the ritualistic context, *parai mēlam* music was performed at the non-*āgama* temples and this music was given to the deities of *kaali, vairavar,* and *amman*, therefore, this percussion instrument was partly associated with this ritualistic tradition.

However, due to the Aurmuganavalar's Tamil and *Saiva* revival movement, non-*āgama* temples and non-*āgama* ritual practices (particularly animal sacrifice) were criticized. Furthermore, this music culture greatly associated with non- *āgama* temples and rituals. This, further, limited its excellence and development. As a result, this reformation heavily supported the *vellālar* caste to dominate performing art culture in Jaffna. Further, *parai* music is just identified as impure music or inauspicious music, but dominant performing art culture of Jaffna failed to capture the aesthetic value of *parai* music. Also, many people have analyzed this music in a context of ritual, i.e. either funeral ritual or temple ritual, but they have not analyzed it as a performing art.

Exploration of emergence, evolution and development of *parai mēlam* music bring to light its rich literature background, its historical significance and its vital role in ancient Tamil culture which communicated various events. In the *Sangam* period, *parai* was a popular *muzhavu* (percussion) instrument for religious, rituals, and communication purposes (Valarmathi, 2009). Although *parai* is described as an ancient instrument, this music became inauspicious in Tamil culture. But, interestingly, this study found that though parai music identified as an inauspicious music, certain ritualistic contexts, i.e. animal sacrifice rituals, and temples, i.e. *Selva sannithi murukan* temple, are honored by parai music. Consequently, uniqueness of this musical tradition acquaints duality of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness in composing rhythms.

Even though, this music distinctly constitutes such uniqueness of auspicious and inauspicious rhythms, the inauspiciousness is always in the forefront among the people of Jaffna. In such a context, among all musical traditions in Tamil culture, it is the only musical tradition that holds dual positions in religious related and non-religious related fields. Due to castetism, ritual pollution, and superior consciousness of *periya mēlam* and *karnatic* music, this tradition and performers (*paraiyar* community) are seen as untouchables. Particularly, performance is varied due to the regional differences, application of rhythms, improvisation, religious and non-religious contexts, *karnatic* and *periya mēlam* music influences.

Conclusion

Symbolic and cultural expression of *parai mēlam* is most significant in caste and religious contexts. In world drum tradition, *parai mēlam* music tradition has a long historical explanation, but unfortunately this performing art has become a diminishing culture due to various factors. Different dialogues and perspectives are built on this tradition and some argue to discourage learning and performing *parai mēlam* while others encourage it. Reputed temples still maintain the tradition in both manual and electronic forms and it is considered mandatory for high-caste funeral rites.

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