Acoustic Entanglements: Negotiating Folk Music in Naiyāṇṭi mēḷam Performance

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"Performance does not simply convey cultural messages already 'known.' On the contrary, it reorganizes and manipulates everyday experiences of social reality, blurs, elides, ironises and sometimes subverts commonsense categories and markers.” (Stokes 1997:97)

Abstract: Using fieldwork and ethnographic research, it is my intention in this article to privilege the voices of contemporary Tamil folk musicians and show how their performances of folk music often contradict and diverge from the hegemonic tropes of popular music discourse. Focusing on one of the more well-known and ubiquitous folk music genres in Tamil Nadu, the naiyāṇṭi mēḷam, I hope to upset the prevailing fiction of folk music as a tradition-bound phenomenon, occupying its own discrete musical space. Listening to the voices of naiyāṇṭi mēḷam folk musicians and paying careful attention to their musics will reveal that these folk artists are actively engaged in complex performance practices that cut across cultural categories and resist facile definition. In order to please their audiences, these musicians are adept in playing not only prescribed ritual “folk” music but film music and Carnatic music as well. Borrowing and refashioning a mixture of sounds from radio, film, cassette, and CD, the naiyāṇṭi mēḷam exhibits a wide range of genres and styles that go well beyond the confines of “folk.” In this article I will argue that both film and Carnatic music are not separate from, but rather central to, the performance of many naiyāṇṭi mēḷam groups. In appropriating
elements from these various genres, and carefully and cleverly reframing them in performance, folk musicians express multiple musical affinities that extend beyond the boundaries of traditional music rooted in local circumstance.

Introducing the ‘naiyăṇṭi mēḷam’
The Tamil word naiyăṇṭi means “teasing,” “joking,” or “ridicule.” Mēḷam roughly translates to English as “ensemble” or “group.” This ensemble is thus appropriately characterized by its “light-spirited, raucous, sometimes slightly obscene tenor, behavior, and performance” (Wolf 2000:914). Members of this group literally make fun (naiyăṇṭi paṇṇa) of themselves, each other, the dancers they accompany, and their audiences. Usually humor is expressed as slapstick comedy. Common comic devices may include (1) loudly blowing a nāṭasvaram at very close range, in another musicians face; (2) secretly attaching a bad (cracked) reed to a nāṭasvaram player’s instrument; (3) knocking a drum stick out of a percussionist’s hand while he is playing; (4) playing on a neighboring musician’s instrument; (5) waving nāṭasvarams wildly in the air while playing; (6) poking fun at another musician when he commits an obvious mistake; (7) using extended technique to interject odd-sounding squeaks and honks into the performance of a piece; and (8) gradually increasing the tempo of a composition until it reaches break neck speed. Sometimes humor takes the form of sexual innuendo, especially if the ensemble is accompanying female dancers. In these instances musicians may engage directly in lascivious dialogue with karaṇṭam and Kuruvan Küṛattί dancers. Players may also use their instruments in suggestive ways.3 On rare occasions musicians will employ humor as a means to engage in subversive tactics and polemical critique of social and political institutions.4

Geographic Distribution
The naiyăṇṭi mēḷam is the most well-known folk music ensemble of Tamil Nadu. Although naiyăṇṭi mēḷam musicians can be found in almost every corner of the state, the heart of this music lies in the Southern districts of Thanjavur, Dindigul, Madurai, Pudukottai, Sivaganga, Virudhunagar, Thoothukudi, Tirunelveli and Kanyakumari. Local history suggests that until the mid-twentieth century, naiyăṇṭi mēḷam musicians lived primarily in villages and were attached to the service of particular temples, for which they provided a variety of musical functions. Today many musicians remain in villages, but a great majority have migrated to large cities such as Madurai, Tirunelveli, Nagercoil, and Thoothukudi.5 Cities offer musicians greater and more lucrative economic opportunities. During the festival season, city-based naiyăṇṭi mēḷam musicians will frequently travel to and perform in nearby and distant villages.
Social Makeup: Caste and Class

All naiyāṇṭi mēḷam musicians are men from either Backwards Castes (BC), Most Backwards Castes (MBC) and Scheduled Castes (SC). Ganesh Kumar, a BC tavil player from Tirunelveli once told me in an interview that “these days, members from many communities have taken up this profession.” Over the course of my research alone, I met musicians from Patayāṭṭi, Koṇār, Tēvar, Yāṭavār, Ācārī, Kampar, Vaṇṇiyar, Toṇṭamāṇ, Yōkīsaṟaṇ, Caḷkiyar, and Paṟaiyar communities. Though they represent a diverse cross-section of Tamil society, all naiyāṇṭi mēḷam musicians share one common feature: they are non-Brahmin. Generally the players in a naiyāṇṭi mēḷam group are all of the same caste. However, inter-caste ensembles are not uncommon. In these groups there typically exists a clear social hierarchy, in which members of the higher caste assume the lead melodic and percussive roles while members of oppressed castes, usually Dalits, are hired to play the supporting (and often lower salaried) percussion parts.

The Troupe

The instrumentation of the naiyāṇṭi mēḷam varies slightly from place to place, and from community to community. In every ensemble a pair of double-reed aerophones, either the nāṭasvaram or nāṭyagam (a shawm slightly shorter than the nāṭasvaram) function as melodic leaders for the group (Wolf 2000:914). Providing the chief rhythmic accompaniment are two double-headed tavils (barrel drums). Interestingly, both the tavil and nāṭasvaram are also used in “classical” musical ensembles known as periya mēḷam in Northern Tamil Nadu and rāja mēḷam in the South. Repertoire and performance context aside, there are key visual features that differentiate the naiyāṇṭi mēḷam from these other ensembles: (1) periya and rāja mēḷam musicians mostly play sitting down while naiyāṇṭi players always play standing, usually in arc formation; (2) tavil players in the classical ensembles play with a short thick stick in the weak hand and finger caps on the dominant hand, whereas naiyāṇṭi tavil players hold a thick stick in the weak hand, and a long thin bamboo stick in the dominant; and (3) classical ensembles, unlike the naiyāṇṭi mēḷam do not feature percussionists other than the two tavil players.

Every naiyāṇṭi mēḷam includes two supporting percussion instruments whose musical roles are subservient to that of the tavil. These can be a set of either pampai and/or uzumī. Each pampai consist of two conical drums, one resting upon the other. The upper drum is played with a curved stick held in the dominant hand and produces a high-pitched staccato sound when struck. The weak hand generally plays the lower drum, also with a curved stick, sometimes rubbing it to create
a moaning-like sound. Unlike the pampai, which is played by musicians of various backgrounds, the urumi is exclusively played by Dalits, especially from the Cakliyar caste. The urumi is an hour-glassed shaped drum and like the pampai is a rubbed membraphone. This drum is widely believed to possess supernatural and sacred powers and when played in religious ceremonies and processions can induce spirit possessions and trance. Besides the above mentioned six (two nāṭasvaram, two tavil, two pampai/urumi) there are occasionally other instruments also incorporated into this ensemble. The tamukku, a small kettledrum played with leather straps, is frequently included in Dalit groups. Other notable instruments include finger cymbals (jālrā) for keeping tāla and a drone-type instrument such as an electronic sruti box or harmonium. Each of these instruments requires the presence of an additional performer (including the electronic sruti box which is held around the neck). A student of one of the main performers typically fills this role.

Performance Settings

The naiyāṭi mēḷam may be hired to play for any number of occasions including tourist programs, business inaugurations, government functions, village festivals, political rallies, conferences, and other private events such as weddings, birthdays, and coming-of-age ceremonies. The majority of naiyāṭi mēḷam performances however, take place during temple festivals known as koṭai tiruvilā. These events are usually held annually and take place over the course of one to three days. During the festival, many offerings – goats, chickens, pigs, eggs, ghee, curd, milk, flowers, and cooked foods – are given to a particular deity or set of deities in an attempt to propitiate their destructive urges and obtain their good will. The naiyāṭi mēḷam, sometimes along with another folk ensemble, is typically hired to provide ritual services and entertainment for these events. Their role in the ritual context of performance is crucial, as it is the naiyāṭi mēḷam that helps to call upon and eventually summon a god or goddess into the body of a designated human medium (Blackburn 1988:42-3). Musically, possession is marked by a very distinct metṭu (melodic tune) and aṭṭi (rhythmic ostinato). The moment of possession is so ritually important and powerful that the performance of anything else (a cinema song or another folk metṭu etc.) could be extremely dangerous. Accompanying possession requires the naiyāṭi mēḷam player to follow carefully prescribed performance idioms. Apart from this ritual context, however, musicians have substantially more freedom to express their musical creativity. Although playing for possession rites is an essential responsibility for any naiyāṭi mēḷam artist, it constitutes a very small percentage of actual performance. During the koṭai tiruvilā and other Hindu religious festivals, the naiyāṭi mēḷam spends most of its time either playing in processions or performing concerts in village squares.
and city blocks. It is within these contexts that the ensemble will play

cinema songs and show off its skills in Carnatic music.

Musicians also devote much of their time accompanying professionally staged folk dances. Dance troupes are sometimes hired for temple festivals and almost always for tourist programs and government-sponsored events. The dances for which a naiyāṇṭī mēḷam might provide accompaniment include karakāṭṭam (pot dance), kāvāṭi āṭṭam (dance associated with the god Murukan, in which dancers balance a wooden burden on their shoulders), poi kāl kutirai (hobby horse dance), māyil āṭṭam (peacock dance), māṭṭu āṭṭam (bullock dance), rāja rāni āṭṭam (king and queen dance), and kuraṉai-kuṟattī (a parody of gypsy/tribal dance). Each type of dance is closely associated with its own specific folk meḻtu and aṭṭi. Once the mood (suṉvilai) of the dance has been established by its appropriate meḻtu, the naiyāṇṭī mēḷam will usually go on to play a medley of devotional and popular film songs.¹³

The aforementioned discussion of the naiyāṇṭī mēḷam’s performance contexts, instruments, and social make-up, has emphasized features of this folk ensemble that are generally recognized as “traditional.” The remainder of this chapter will consider the “non-traditional” syncretic practices characteristic of naiyāṇṭī mēḷam performance: particularly the playing of cinema songs and Carnatic music, a phenomenon heretofore overlooked by both Indian and Western scholars.

Introducing Film Music

While it is difficult to know exactly when naiyāṇṭī mēḷam musicians began including film songs in their repertoire, performers seem to agree that the practice developed shortly after the introduction of sound to Indian cinema in 1931. Today, nearly eighty-percent of a typical naiyāṇṭī mēḷam concert features the performance of film music. The average player knows anywhere from five-hundred to one-thousand film songs and must constantly update his song list to meet the demands of the public. Some of these songs, especially the older “classic” ones from the 1940s-1960s, have become standard repertoire, passed down from generation to generation through oral transmission. Knowledge of more recent songs, however, is less standardized and may differ from individual to individual or group to group. Naiyāṇṭī mēḷam players learn most cinema songs through informal strategies and methods. Common techniques include watching film song programs on satellite television; listening to the radio; buying and memorizing soundtracks to films before their official release; and attending the performances of other naiyāṇṭī mēḷam musicians. Many naiyāṇṭi mēḷam players view learning cinema songs through electronic media as a modern adaptation of “traditional” practice. Rajkumar (tāvil) commented in an interview that:
In order to learn film songs, today’s upcoming artists buy cassettes and listen to them carefully. They listen to what other musicians have played. After listening, they themselves try to play it. This is also how our ancestors played in the days before cinema. They learned just by listening. They could listen to anybody and then play.14

Like many musicians with whom I spoke, Rajkumar explained that the performance of film songs does not constitute a break with folk tradition, but is a necessary and identifying feature of the naiyāṇī mēḷam ensemble.

Re-mediating Film Songs; The Expression of Multiple Musical Affinities

We tend to think of cultural forms as whole and coherent: either wholly corrupt or wholly authentic. Whereas, they are deeply contradictory: they play on contradictions, especially when they function in the domain of the ‘popular.’ (Hall 1981:233)

Many scholars of Indian music have expressed dismay over the fact that film songs have replaced entire folk repertoires and in some instances have contributed to the disappearance of folk music traditions altogether. Peter Manuel describes the homogenizing effects of the Indian film industry on folk music practice, lamenting how film musics can undermine community and replace traditional oral culture. These mass mediated forms he argues, often result in the “alienation of individuals from their potential as performers, and of communities from their ability to exercise direct influence on professional forms of entertainment” (Manuel 1993:8). Other scholars like Baily (1981) and Hewitt (1983) have similarly emphasized the negative impact that mediated musics have had on traditional Indian culture through processes of commercialization, acculturation, and decontextualization (Booth 1990:160). While it is true that the Indian film industry has had a detrimental impact on some of India’s performing arts traditions, film music, as Manuel also points out, has the potential to enrich local traditions, exposing folk artists to a broader range of cultural forms, genres, and styles (1993:8). Paul Greene, in his research on commercial cassette recordings in a Tamil village, similarly concludes that mass-mediated musics do not necessarily endanger local culture or religion. Instead, he found that villagers actually use popular cassette musics to “grow and expand, perhaps threatening to consume the cultures of those around them” (1995:8).

Despite film music’s hegemonizing and homogenizing power, naiyāṇī mēḷam musicians have kept pace with these centrally-produced popular sounds. Without abandoning their “traditional” repertoire, these folk musicians have successfully integrated popular Tamil film songs into
their daily performance practices, and in the process have reassigned them with new meanings and interpretations. Rather than simply mimic or imitate film songs, naiyāṇṭi mēḷam musicians engage in what David Novak calls acts of re-mediation. Re-mediation refers to a creative technique of appropriation that “mobilizes distance, irony, and the effects of class and cultural difference, resituating the products of mass media within the divergent public spheres they intersect and help to create” (Novak: forthcoming). This theoretical concept is useful for exploring the ways in which film songs undergo transformations in meaning as they are performed in new contexts and situations. By looking at the naiyāṇṭi mēḷam’s re-mediation of film musics, I hope to show that folk musicians assume a variety of musical identities and thus challenge the notion that “authentic” folk music is predicated on its difference from other non-folk cultural expressions.

Re-mediating the Classical: Sivaji’s Nakumōmu
Contrary to stereotypes that portray folk musicians as located outside upper-class cultural spaces, naiyāṇṭi mēḷam players regularly borrow from the sounds and styles of the elite. An analysis of a naiyāṇṭi mēḷam performance of the well-known Carnatic composition “Nakumōmu” will reveal the ways in which these musicians are able to reconstitute a classical song with subjectively inspired meaning.

A few years ago, while attending a tiruvilāj just outside Madurai, I heard a friend’s naiyāṇṭi mēḷam play a song that I immediately recognized as a Carnatic classical piece. Having forgotten the name of the composition, I turned to a devotee standing next to me and asked whether he could identify it. The following dialogue ensued:

AP: Sir, do you know what the name of this song is?
Devotee: Tīllānā Mōkanāmpāḷ. It is a Sivaji Ganeshan song.
AP: Is it Carnatic music?
Devotee: No, it is a Sivaji Ganeshan song. A film song.
AP: Is that so? I didn’t know that. What is the song’s name?
Devotee: I don’t know the name. It’s from the film Tīllānā Mōkanāmpāḷ.
AP: I thought it was Carnatic music.
Devotee: Yes. It is a film song but it has a Carnatic style.

Somewhat confused, I decided not to pursue the conversation any further. During a performance break later in the evening, I approached my friend Ramaswamy (nāṭasvaram) in the naiyāṇṭi mēḷam and asked him about the song they had played earlier. He replied that the song’s
name was “Nakumõmu,” and that it was a Carnatic composition by Saint Tyagaraja. When I mentioned that an audience member had misled me to believe that it was a film song, Ramaswamy chuckled and remarked [in English] “it is a two-in-one” and went on to explain how Tyagaraja’s “Nakumõmu” was also the title-song of the hit-movie Tillanâ Mõkanâmãpâl (1968), starring Sivaji Ganeshan.

“Nakumõmu” is a favorite amongst naiyânti mëlams because its performance generates multiple layers of socio-cultural and historical association. Ramaswamy, for instance, explained that whenever he performs “Nakumõmu,” he is reminded of (1) the film song, (2) the Tyagaraja composition, and (3) the performances of great nâtâsvaram players from the past, like Rajarattinam Pillai and his disciple Karukurichi Arunachalam. Rajarattinam Pillai was probably the most iconic nâtâsvaram player of the twentieth century. He was also the historical figure upon whom Sivaji’s character in Tillanâ Mõkanâmãpâl is modeled. In addition to his acclaimed virtuosity on the nâtâsvaram, Rajarattinam was widely recognized for his determination to achieve greater respect for periya mëlams. Anecdotes about his refusal to play shirtless, his insistence on sitting while performing, and his refusal to wear his hair in the traditional kutumi style are well known in folk music circles, and are cited frequently by naiyânti mëlams (Terada 2000:477).

In adopting selective visual and performative aspects of Carnatic music, Rajarattinam, a non-Brahmin isai Veḷḷâlar musician, challenged Brahmin restrictions placed on the periya mëlams and helped to legitimize it as a classical tradition. Karukurichi Arunachalam, the other person mentioned by Ramaswamy, also deserves some explication here. For Ramaswamy, the Yôkisvarâq community from which he comes, Arunachalam is remembered/mythologized as the naiyânti mëlam performer, who through an encounter with Rajarattinam Pillai, was able to cross over from naiyânti mëlams to periya mëlams. In one of our interview’s Ramaswamy recounted the nature of this meeting:

Once Rajarattinam Pillai was supposed to play at a concert. However, he was very late to arrive. Arunachalam, who had come to attend the concert decided to entertain the audience himself while they were waiting for Rajarattinam. Rather than play naiyânti mëlams, he played one of the classical songs that Rajarattinam was famous for. When Rajarattinam finally arrived, he heard Arunachalam’s playing and immediately decided to make this folk musician one of his students. The song that Arunachalam played during Rajarattinam’s concert was a classical kîrtanai. That really impressed Rajarattinam Pillai.16

In performing a classical song from Tillanâ Mõkanâmãpâl, Ramaswamy temporarily links himself to the two revolutionary figures of Rajarattinam.
Pillai and Karukurichi Arunachalam. Just as both men went against the grain in their appropriation of upper-caste symbols associated with Carnatic classical music, Ramaswamy’s appropriation of “Nakumômû” participates in a subversive cultural politics of his own. Via film, he and his folk ensemble cleverly re-mediate a classical Carnatic composition into their naiyângû mêlam performance. At the same time, because of the film’s association with the nâtâsvaram player Rajarattinam Pillai, Ramaswamy situates his performance of “Nakumômû” within a distinctly non-Brahmin ideological framework, thus claiming this classical Carnatic song as part of his own heritage and tradition.

Re-mediating The Folk: Performing the Self
Some scholars have characterized the relationship between mainstream media and peripheral subcultures as one of conflict and struggle. Writing on emergent forms of modernity in rock n’ roll, Grossberg contends that “culture is assumed to be built upon the inherent difference and constant battle between the center and the margin” (Grossberg 1988:321). Gregory Booth’s research on Indian brass-bands similarly frames traditional folk artists as “constantly battling” the media in order to “re-build their own particular corner of Indian traditional culture with the bricks provided them by an all powerful medium” (Booth 1990:165). While some naiyângû mêlam players feel that they are in perpetual competition with the film industry, the majority of musicians describe their relationship to the media in terms of exchange and mutual alliance. When asked about their customary borrowing and appropriation of film music, naiyângû mêlam players are quick to point out that cinema music directors are engaged in comparable practices; these media elites regularly borrow elements from folk sources and incorporate them into their film compositions. One tavil player from Madurai, described the circulation of ideas between the naiyângû mêlam and the cinema as a continuous and egalitarian interchange:

“Just like the cinema takes things from the folk, folk musicians have taken much from the cinema. Naiyângû mêlam players are like co-workers with the cinema. They take things from us and change them according to their needs. In the same way, we take from them. We are like collaborators.”

Imagining the relationship between the film industry and folk musicians as an equitable partnership necessarily glosses over the unequal distribution of power within which this relationship is situated. Film producers and directors have often exploited folk musicians and their traditions, often for great profit to themselves and little to no recognition for the folk musicians. While folk musicians may have little control over
the ways in which folk music is represented and used in the cinema, they do execute the power to reclaim and re-present film songs in their own performances, according to their own agendas.

I have found that naiyāṇṭi mēḷam folk artists are particularly fond of appropriating and performing folk music from the cinema. Taking great pride in the fact that music directors like Ilaiyaraja, Yuvan Shankar Raja, and Kartik Raja consider folk songs important enough to represent in their film scores, naiyāṇṭi mēḷam musicians often play these songs in their own performances. They praise these filmic versions of folk songs for their iyalbhāna (natural) and nacamāna (authentic) folk quality. Nirmal, a nātasvaram player from Madurai likened Ilaiyaraja’s compositions to actual folk songs, explaining that “because of their similarity to village music, they are easy for us to memorize and play.” Although they evoke the naturalness of the village, Ilaiyaraja’s, as well as his sons’ folk songs, are effectively cinematic representations of folk music; created, edited, and packaged by a handful of engineers, technicians, and directors. Re-mediated within the performances of the naiyāṇṭi mēḷam however, these cinematic folk songs are transformed into recognizably different musical products.

Despite the fact that naiyāṇṭi mēḷam musicians extol Ilaiyaraja’s folk music for its faithfulness and authenticity, musicians make considerable and significant changes to them. Rather than attempt to reproduce a perfect duplicate of a film song, naiyāṇṭi mēḷam players take pleasure in refashioning them according to their own distinctive tastes and aesthetic devices. Consider a naiyāṇṭi mēḷam performance of Ilaiyaraja’s hit song Ayyakkili (1976). A comparison of a naiyāṇṭi mēḷam rendition of this song (recorded by the author in 2007) to the original film version will highlight some of the major changes that a popular film song may undergo in its remediation.

In the film version of Ayyakkili each chorus is separated by a long and elaborate melodic interlude, featuring musical instruments such as the santār, flute, and string orchestra. In the naiyāṇṭi mēḷam’s performance, the interludes are cut (as well as the introduction), leaving only the chorus. Treated just like a folk mettu, the chorus is repeated over and over again, accompanied to the beat of a percussive ostinato. The naiyāṇṭi mēḷam’s performance of Ayyakkili also differs rhythmically from the original. In Ilaiyaraja’s version a tabla accompanies the song, alternating between two ostinato patterns each with a distinctive three beat waltz-like feel. Contrarily, in the naiyāṇṭi mēḷam’s rendition, the melody is accompanied by two rhythmic ostinatos both with a very strong polyrhythmic triple-duple feel, much more typical of actual folk music performance. Another noteworthy modification of the naiyāṇṭi
mēḷam’s performance has to do with tempo. The tempo of Ilaiyaraja’s song remains constant from beginning to end. However, as is common in naiyāṇṭi mēḷam performance, this group periodically increases the speed of the song until it approaches double the original tempo. These tempo changes transform Ilaiyaraja’s composition, with its somber tone and lyrics of unrequited love and longing, into a lighthearted and danceable folk tune.

In the hands of the naiyāṇṭi mēḷam, cinema songs like Aŋyakkili are important sources of empowerment and legitimization. Naiyāṇṭi mēḷam musicians often complain that their audiences are becoming less and less interested in patronizing traditional non-cinema based folk musics. As entertainers, folk musicians’ first and foremost responsibility is to please their spectators. Ramasamy notes:

Naiyāṇṭi mēḷam players must always play according to the needs of their audience. If they don’t want to hear traditional village songs, then we definitely cannot play these songs. Ninety percent of the time they want cinema songs.22

Since musicians cannot play traditional folk tunes (rājapāṭṭu, kāṇṭi cinṭu, tenmāṇku, vīrāṇṭiyā kaṭṭamman, noṭi cinṭu) as often as they would like, cinema songs, especially folk songs from the cinema, constitute an alternative channel through which these artists can articulate their identity as marapupūṟṟamāṇu nāṭiapuru kalaiñarkal or “traditional folk artists.” By (re)presenting film’s representations of their own folk musics, naiyāṇṭi mēḷam folk artists benefit from what Benjamin and other scholars have termed the “emancipatory potential” of mass mediated commodities. Rather than simply reflect the hegemonic ideologies of large corporations and media conglomerates (Adorno 1979), film songs, when used by naiyāṇṭi musicians, become vehicles for self-expression. The performance of film songs can thus be understood as socially and culturally liberating, especially since they give folk musicians the opportunity to speak back to the representations of folk music propagated by powerful media elites.23

Film Songs and the Entertaining of Audiences

So far I have discussed the ways in which naiyāṇṭi mēḷam musicians remediate film songs to express their own interests and agendas. However, folk musicians also use film songs to articulate their audience’s desires, pleasures, and politics. To quote one musician at length:

When the naiyāṇṭi mēḷam plays, the audience must understand everything. For example, when the procession goes around the temple with pāḷ kūṟam (milk pot) on their heads, at that time we must play the naiyāṇṭi mettu. In some towns when they stand in front of their houses, we will play songs suitable to those people. For Nagercoil there is an aṭṭi.
Valliyur district... and Tirunelveli have their own atis. In Rajapalayam, Srivilliputhur, Meenakshipuram, ...to whichever place we go, we must play in a way that is appropriate for that place. Therefore, we can’t assuredly say that we should always play in this or that model. We have to play according to the ijamporu. Wherever we go, we must learn the model of that place and remember it the next time we go there. Whatever we should play, we will press firmly to our heart (memorize it). When we go to places where they play mahuji melodies, we also have to play mahuji melodies. In other places we will have to play the naiyāṇi mettu. In some places we’ll have to play kiiṭikānui (a type of ciṇṭu song). Nowadays we will also have to play a number of caste songs. For example, there is a song that goes [sings] “There are no other castes like the Tēvar caste”. That’s an example of a Muthuramalingam Thevar song that we will definitely have to play. There are also Karthik [the name of a famous Tēvar actor] songs. [Sings] “In the Land of Tirunelvelli”...we will have to play all of these types of songs. All Tēvars will know these cinema songs and will desire to hear them. If we go to an area where Nāṭārs live, we will have to play songs from Saratkumar (a very politically active Nāṭār actor) films. We will also play songs from Ramarajan, another Nāṭār actor’s films. Our job is to play whatever type of film song catches their māyam (heart/mind). If we play that way, we will continue to get work. There is a different climate for each place we go. We have to play songs suitable for the atmosphere and the castes and communities who are present. If we play this way, they will call us back the next time there is a performance and there will be work for us. The mēlam definitely has to play in a way that reflects the ijamporu. That is an important rule for being a naiyāṇi mēlam performer.24

As this musician points out, naiyāṇi mēlam players must not only be familiar with the specific folk styles, atis and meṭṭus appropriate to each place they travel, they must also learn locally meaningful cinema songs necessary for “capturing” their audience’s māyam (heart/mind).

The re-mediation of film songs is a useful tool for naiyāṇi mēlam players, especially when they are performing for new audiences, in unknown places. In recent years, with the support of the Tamil Nadu government, this ensemble has become something of a cultural export. While in the past, most groups did not travel beyond the southern districts of Tamil Nadu, more and more are now traveling nationally and internationally. Not necessarily familiar with the folk music styles and practices of these new places, naiyāṇi mēlam musicians mostly play film songs in order to help them connect with these foreign audiences. For example, when a Madurai-based ensemble traveled to Delhi, they incorporated a number of popular Hindi film songs into their performance.
Similarly, groups who have performed for diasporic Tamil communities in Singapore, Malaysia, and America find that audiences are significantly more receptive to Tamil cinema songs than they are to “traditional” folk musics.

Naiyāṇī mēḷam musicians are skilled intermediaries who negotiate the social, cultural, and political dynamics of diverse audiences and settings. Such brokering skills demand knowledge and understanding of what folk musicians call ijamporul. When translated into English, ijamporul means something akin to “circumstance” or “context.” These terms however, do not adequately capture ijamporul’s full semantic range. A combination of the words ijam, meaning place, and porul, meaning significance or substance, ijamporul refers not only to the particular circumstances of an event such as its time and location, but also to its less objective and ineffable qualities, such as the kuyam or intrinsic character of the audience in attendance. With an awareness and understanding of ijamporul, naiyāṇī mēḷam musicians can fashion performances so that they that are poruttam (fitting), ottucarutal (appropriate), and myrai (correct) for the specific social, cultural, and political dispositions of their varied listeners. Hence, when performing for a predominantly Tēvar or Nāṭār community, a naiyāṇī mēḷam would very likely play songs from films featuring Tēvar and Nāṭār actors correspondingly. Similarly, if a they were playing for a Murukan temple festival, the musicians would play cinema songs that somehow refer to the god Murukan in their lyrics or visual imagery.

Underlying the naiyāṇī mēḷam’s performance of film musics is a sensitivity to the emotional needs, political orientations, and social positions of their audience. Every naiyāṇī mēḷam performance is constructed in accordance with what Paul Green defines as “spheres of acceptability” (Greene 1995:152). In other words, certain sounds, styles, songs etc. appropriate for one audience, may be entirely unsuitable for another. For instance, if a naiyāṇī mēḷam were to play a song from a film starring MG Ramachandran at a DMK sponsored function, it would likely cause some annoyance amongst the DMK’s constituents, and could even incite them to reprimand the musical ensemble directly. However, at an event with many AIADMK supporters in attendance, this same song would be heartily welcomed. When naiyāṇī mēḷam musicians appropriate film songs into their performances, they “mobilize different politics of identity” (Guilbault 1997: 40). As entertainers, they perceive their role to be one of representing their audiences – supplying a musical voice for their interests, concerns, and desires. Film songs are thus indispensable to the musical practices of these musicians, who, situated in largely translocal and transcultural musical worlds, must constantly position and reposition themselves with reference to different communities.
Carnatic Percussion and the Redefinition of Folk Rhythm

So far I have discussed the naiyāṇṭi mēḻam’s “audible entanglements” with cinema music and have demonstrated how folk musicians transform film songs into subjective vehicles of expression. Through film songs, naiyāṇṭi mēḻam artists gain access to a host of genres and styles, each with its own set of cultural and political associations. The re-mediation of film songs however, is not the only way in which folk musicians articulate modern musical identities for themselves. Naiyāṇṭi mēḻam players frequently appropriate percussive idioms characteristic of Carnatic music into their performance practice.

Much of popular and academic discourse has constructed South Indian folk music as essentially and intrinsically different from “classical” music (Gover [1871] 2002; Day [1891] 1977; Raghavan 1958; Sambamoorthy [1952] 1984; Sundaram 1970; Perumal 2003; Jaya 2004; P. Subramanian 2005). In these sources, folk music is portrayed as sonically simple and culturally functional; its value and significance lie in its prescribed cultural and social role. Carnatic music in these works, on the other hand, is often identified with complexity and aesthetic depth. Consider the following excerpt on folk music from P. Subramanian’s book Social History of the Tamils:

Due to patronage thus extended, a few with devotion and dedication, were able to enrich the Carnatic music which flourished only in the midst of abundance and affluence. The poor folk who burnt the candle at both ends just to appease their hunger, neither had leisure nor means to relish such music which practically was too difficult and intricate an art for them to understand and appreciate. As an oppressed sect, they needed direct involvement in all recreations to give free vent to their pent up emotions like their joys and their sorrows, despair and disappointment...In a way, their songs were a spontaneous overflow of their emotions depicting their life and experiences in and around the village in which they had been living with all their Kith and Kin who had been near and dear to them. (2005:362-3)

Subramanian paints a portrait of “the folk” as illiterate simpletons, able to express their inner emotions through spontaneous songs. Without the education and affluence of the intelligentsia, the folk, he argues, are incapable of either understanding or appreciating non-folk art forms such as Carnatic music. Such accounts (and there are many of them) are indeed shortsighted, since they lack careful investigation of the ways in which the spheres of folk and classical historically overlap, “carrying materials and ideas in a never-ending interchange between them” (Frasca 1990:79).
As traveling artists that regularly played for Hindu temple festivals, naiyanni melam players are likely to have rubbed shoulders with musicians from diverse socio cultural worlds for decades, if not centuries. These musicians would have included Brahmin court musicians as well as non-Brahmin periya melam and raja melam players. Kersenboom-Story proposes that South Indian Hindu temples, as early as the 16th century, constituted important centers of musical exchange, wherein all sectors of society, including the village and court would meet (Allen 1998:37). I lack sufficient evidence to speculate as to when naiyanni melam musicians started borrowing from non-folk devotional and court musics. However, it is fair to suggest that this process of interchange and influence began some time ago. Whatever one might say about the past, I can say with assurance that most of today’s naiyanni melam musicians, especially drummers, listen to, appreciate, and actively and creatively appropriate rhythmic elements from Carnatic music. Borrowing heavily from the drumming formulas of Carnatic periya melam percussive traditions, many naiyanni melam players consciously and purposefully incorporate these seemingly “foreign” elements into their “traditional” musical vernacular. The extent to which they do so is remarkable and is worth investigating in more depth.

Bringing Carnatic Music to the Naiyanni melam

All six naiyanni melam drummers (three pampai, and three tavil) interviewed for this project had some knowledge of Carnatic music. The three tavil players had formally studied Carnatic drumming, either as part of a guru-shishya type relationship and/or through a government music college. According to Ganesh Kumar, currently a tavil student at the Madurai Isai Kallir (Madurai Music College), naiyanni melam players have only begun to seek formal education in Carnatic music within the last few years. Previously, they gained access to this music solely through listening and emulation. As he describes it: “Our ancestors would take from Carnatic music whatever they could understand. Now however, because of the music colleges, naiyanni melam artists can learn to play [it] properly.”

Murugan, a Dalit naiyanni melam tavil artist from Madurai, acquired his knowledge of Carnatic music through several channels. His initial interest in Carnatic music was sparked when he began playing bharatanatyam songs from early Tamil cinema. The first möräś and kórväś (rhythmic design figures) that he introduced into his playing were taken directly from classic films like, Koncum Salankäj, and Salankai Oli. To further enhance his Carnatic rhythmic skills, he then began private instruction with a Dalit tavil player who had studied Carnatic music with a periya melam drummer. In some places, naiyanni melam tavil artists may even play in Carnatic ensembles such as the raja and periya melam. Rajkumar
for example, is from a community in Tirunelveli that is known for its "folk" and "classical" tavil-nátasvaram playing. From an early age, he began formal training in Carnatic tavil under his father and guru K. Palani Rajesh. By the time he was fourteen, he had already given Carnatic music kaccāris (concerts) at weddings and temple festivals. Rajkumar was also exposed to the sounds of the naiyāṅṭi mēḷam in his childhood. He often traveled with his uncle, a well-known nāṭasvaram player to village temple festivals, at which he would carefully study and observe the playing of naiyāṅṭi mēḷam tavil players. Today, Rajkumar continues to perform in both naiyāṅṭi and periyā mēḷam groups and has developed a reputation for being able to cleverly integrate rhythmic elements characteristic of one ensemble into the other.

Besides learning Carnatic music through formal modes of transmission, naiyāṅṭi mēḷam drummers have also used informal means, such as listening to radio broadcasts and commercial recordings, as well as watching television and cinema. Ramamoorthy a young pampai artist has acquired a small library of pirated cassettes of Carnatic music, which includes recordings of the singer Jesudas, the great tavil artist Pazhanivel, mirutaṅkam player, Karaikudi Mani, and violinist Cunnakudi Vaidyanathan. He and other young naiyāṅṭi mēḷam drummers get together on their days off and listen to these recordings for hours, trying to memorize sarvalaghu (time flow) patterns and kaṇakku (calculation based design) figures that they think would translate well to the naiyāṅṭi context. Even I, as a mirutaṅkam student of eight years, was seen by naiyāṅṭi mēḷam drummers as a potential resource of Carnatic music. After discovering that I had a background in mirutaṅkam, tavil and pampai players would frequently ask me to recite colkaḷu for them. At times I would be asked to repeat a körvai or mōrā countless times, until those present had all committed it to memory. Other times, drummers would transcribe my colkaḷu on scrap paper and work on memorizing it later. I was impressed with the rapidity with which many drummers were able to grasp this material, and on more than one occasion was pleasantly shocked to hear drummers play a rhythmic figure in a performance that I had recited for them earlier.

Carnatic Music and the Negotiation of Stigma
There are many reasons for folk musicians’ eagerness to appropriate Carnatic music elements. Besides having a genuine interest in Carnatic music, naiyāṅṭi mēḷam players use it to reach and appeal to diverse listeners. The ability to perform elements from the Carnatic repertoire certainly helps endear the naiyāṅṭi mēḷam to urban and cosmopolitan audiences, who might prefer to hear Carnatic music instead of traditional folk songs. More importantly, the use of Carnatic music helps these
musicians distance themselves from the negative stigmas associated with being a folk musician. Like the special nātakam stage actors described by Susan Seizer (2005), a categorical place for folk musicians “clearly exists in the mix of contemporary Tamil society among all the other communities, professions, castes, subcastes, groups and subgroups, and subcultures” (2005:31). In general, the public’s view of folk musicians, especially naiyāṇṭi mēḷam players, is one of circumspection and sometimes depreciation. Most common among the beliefs that circulate about naiyāṇṭi mēḷam musicians is that they “lack muṟai, a kind of propriety and sense of social order” (2005:31). Largely because of their on stage interactions with kuravan kuratti and karakāṭam dancers, they have developed a reputation for being lewd and sexually explicit. Like other folk musicians, naiyāṇṭi players are also unfairly stereotyped as rauṭikal (rowdies), fond of drinking and aggressive speech, and by and large untrustworthy in fiscal matters.

Naiyāṇṭi mēḷam musicians are well aware of the stigmas attached to their profession, and must constantly negotiate these in their daily interactions with their audiences, patrons, family, and friends. Introducing Carnatic music to their performances is one way these players seek to gain stature and respect, and dispel negative stereotypes. Ramaswamy explains:

No matter how troubled we are, when we play Carnatic music we feel happy. We can’t expect that from playing folk music. Sometimes there will be a drunk guy in the audience who will say “hey”. There are wilder situations that arise when we play naiyāṇṭi. But with Carnatic music you don’t get any of this craziness. There is more respect for playing Carnatic style music. The public doesn’t respect folk music. They respect the periyā mēḷam more. When we play folk music, they [the audience] will address the tavil player saying, “Hey! You! koṭṭukāran! For the nāṭasvaram, they will say pipikāran. But, if we play Carnatic music, they will call us respectfully as tavil kalaiñar [tavil artist].29

Koṭṭukāran (one who beats) and pipikāran (one who makes the pipi sound) are both derogatory terms that refer to tavil and nāṭasvaram players of the naiyāṇṭi mēḷam. These epithets are insulting and demeaning to one’s character. In Ramaswamy’s experience these insults are more likely to be hurled when the naiyāṇṭi mēḷam is playing folk songs. On the other hand, when they play Carnatic music, he describes the audience response as respectful and deferent.

Some naiyāṇṭi mēḷam musicians feel that they garner the most respect when they adhere to the rules and regulations that govern Carnatic music, and are cautious not to deviate from the framework of rāga or tāla. Others however, are less concerned with these issues. For example, when naiyāṇṭi mēḷam artists play complex rhythmic compositions
like körvas or môras, they may not resolve them at the “Carnatic-ally” appropriate place in the tāḷa. Likewise, the improvised ṛḷāpanas of some ndhasvaram players introduce swarās (notes) that are unconventional for the particular rāgā. Whether or not they adhere to strict Carnatic idioms, ṛḷāpanas and körvas have the power to lend a Carnatic sensibility to a naiyāṇṭi mēḷam performance. Their value for some artists lies not in their “proper” execution per se, but in their signification of Carnatic-ness and the resulting cultural capital that musicians accrue from playing them. As a pampai artist once confessed to me:

I don’t always understand Carnatic music. I don’t know tāḷa well, but I can play in the model of a mōrā. If I just play a mōrā, and please the audience with its sound, that is enough. The village folk will know that this mōrā is from Carnatic music.

In Bourdieu’s terms, knowledge of Carnatic music could be said to constitute a type of symbolic capital for naiyāṇṭi mēḷam players. The performance of Carnatic music, associated with the educated elite and economically privileged, confers prestige. It can thus serve as an important vehicle through which naiyāṇṭi mēḷam musicians are able to dispel stigmas and achieve greater status for themselves and their folk tradition.

Conclusion

In a region as musically diverse and rich in folk music as Tamil Nadu, we need to begin to interrogate the ways in which folk music has been represented as an essentialized category, limited to a particular sound, structure, and meaning. As I have tried to demonstrate in this article, naiyāṇṭi mēḷam players contest musical boundaries and categories, actively incorporating varied mediated musical forms into their lives. Not simply representing a musical culture to and for itself, the naiyāṇṭi mēḷam communicates complex forms of expression that cannot incontrovertibly be reduced to narrow and stereotypical definitions of “folk.”

Notes

1 Much of the inspiration for this argument comes from Jocelyn Guilbault’s research on Zouk music from the French West Indies. Guilbault (1997) highlights the complexity of the Zouk phenomenon (particularly the fact that Zouk artists have been exposed to and participated in a wide range of music genres all their lives) in order to question the “no longer obvious relation between ethnicity and music” (1997:33). Though I am not specifically concerned with issues of ethnicity in this article, I am interested in Guilbault’s advocacy for a new type of research that looks at multiple and overlapping musical identities and their relational character.

Interview with Dr. K.A. Gunasekeran, 2006.

Naiyāṇṭi mēḻam players who are hired to perform at the funerals of higher castes will sometimes poke fun of the deceased’s family members and friends who have come to pay their respects. In the funeral context, it is the responsibility of the mēḻam to follow and accompany individual mourners as they arrive at the deceased’s house. Though I have never witnessed it myself, musicians are given the license to mock and make fun of higher caste individuals through body gesture and clever word play. Such behavior transgresses social norms and accounts for a temporary subversion of the caste hierarchy (Interview with Dr. K.A. Gunasekeran, 2006).

Despite the fact that most naiyāṇṭi mēḻam musicians live in urban centers, popular representations continue to portray them as rustic villagers.

Dalits, who constitute the majority of naiyāṇṭi mēḻam musicians in Tamil Nadu, have their own ensembles in which they play all of the instruments, including the lead tavil and nāṭasvaram. In addition to accompanying a variety of other functions, Dalit ensembles also play for funerals. It is probably because of their association with these inauspicious occasions that Dalits are proscribed from playing the lead instruments in inter-caste groups.

The bamboo stick produces a much more powerful sound than the finger caps, and is said to be one of the naiyāṇṭi mēḻam’s most distinguishing characteristics.

On occasion there may only be one supporting drummer, however, this is rare.

The urumi is typically heard in the central and north-central districts of Tamil Nadu. Since my research was concentrated in the Southern districts of the state, I was unable to consult urumi musicians, or record naiyāṇṭi mēḻam performances that included this instrument. All performances discussed here feature pambai drummers as supporting accompaniment.

In the past, the ottu (short double reed nāṭasvaram like instrument) was most commonly used to provide the melodic drone. In contemporary practice this instrument has been almost completely replaced by the śruti box and harmonium.

Within the koṭai, possession marks the climax of ritual worship and, depending on its level of intensity, may serve as the criterion by which the festival is judged as either successful or unsuccessful (Blackburn 1988:42-3).

Sometimes, though not always, these film songs will directly or tangentially relate to the dance form itself. For example, I once witnessed a kagavoṣu kurattī performance in which the musicians cleverly worked in a tribal sounding song from the M.G.R. Hit Nāṭy Yēy Piṅantēy. This was greatly appreciated by the audience, for whom this song recalled the exaggerated and exoticized tribal dancing depicted in the film.
Rarely do naiyāṇī mēḷam musicians play Carnatic compositions that do not appear in film. The reasons for this may be two-fold: (1) naiyāṇī mēḷam musicians do not readily have access to Carnatic music whose performance and transmission is controlled by upper-caste communities and (2) folk musicians consciously play songs that are familiar to their audiences, who are typically from the lower castes.

Much of Ilaiyaraja’s music is based on actual field recordings of folk musics. Since his youth, he has been collecting recordings of folk and has amassed one of the largest folk music collections in Tamil Nadu.

Folk musicians frequently use the term meṭṭu when referring to the melodies of cinema songs. One musician might for example, instruct another to “play the Ayyakkīḷi meṭṭu.”

Consider the ways in which naiyāṇī mēḷam folk musicians use film songs to introduce aspects of classicism into their performances.

Borrowed from Guilbault’s publication Governing Sound, “audible entanglements” refers to the ways in which sounds can be enmeshed in various political, social, cultural, and economic discourses.

As Richard Frasca (1990) notes “the multidimensional influence of the folk on the classical and the classical on the folk is a phenomenon that has clearly been present in South India for at least two millennia” (1990:79).

The majority of naiyāṇī mēḷam players are not studying Carnatic music in government colleges. Though government colleges offer tuition remission for students of lower caste standing, many folk musicians still cannot afford the cost of exam fees or the time away from paid employment. In Ganesh Kumar’s case, he is the only representative of his extended family to earn a degree in Carnatic music; the cost of sending an additional family member would be a burden. His responsibility is therefore to not only learn Carnatic tavil, but to share and transmit the knowledge that he acquires at college with the other players in his community.

The mirutuṇkam is the principle drum used to accompany Carnatic classical music.
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