

PART 2:

**THE NAIYANDI MELAM:
ONE ENSEMBLE, MANY MUSICS**

CHAPTER THREE:
PERFORMING IDENTITY:
FILM MUSIC AND ITS ‘AFFECTIVE ALLIANCES’

In the preceding chapters I **have** investigated the ways in which colonialist, nationalist, and regionalist academic and political institutions have appropriated the concept of “folk music” and used it for their own ends. These institutions, in their endeavors to define Tamil folk music reified **its** authenticity, ancientness, and homogeneity. I have also shown that in imagining an “ideal type” of folk music, dominant discourses continually ignored and dismissed contemporaneous folk music practices, regarding them as either “mere degenerate reflections of past glory or as bastardized concoctions devoid of ‘authenticity’” (Shiloah 1983:227). Historically, little attention has been paid to the thoughts and definitions of folk musicians themselves. The result of this inattention is problematic: popular representations of Tamil folk music are divested from the actual people and performances they purport to represent.

The two chapters that follow are based on my conversations, experiences, and interactions with naiyandi melam folk musicians in Tamil Nadu, South India. Using an ethnographic “on the ground” approach, 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 naiyandi melam folk musicians and paying careful attention to their music will reveal that these folk artists are actively engaged in

complex performance practices that cut across cultural categories and resist facile definition.¹ In order to please their audiences, these musicians are adept in playing not only prescribed ritual “folk” music but also the hottest commercial hits. Borrowing and refashioning a mixture of sounds from radio, film, cassette, and CD, the naiyandi melam exhibits an incredible range of genres and styles that go well beyond the confines of “folk.”

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The discussion of these issues requires a brief background on the naiyandi melam, including its geography, social makeup, instrumentation, and performance settings.

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Defining ‘Naiyandi Melam’

The Tamil word *naiyānti* means “teasing”, “joking”, or “ridicule.”² *Mēlam* 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

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¹ Much of the inspiration for these chapters comes from Jocelyn Guilbault’s research on Zouk music from the French West Indies. In her article *Interpreting World Music* (1997) Guilbault highlights the complexity of the Zouk phenomenon (particular 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 this thesis is not specifically concerned with issues of ethnicity, 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.

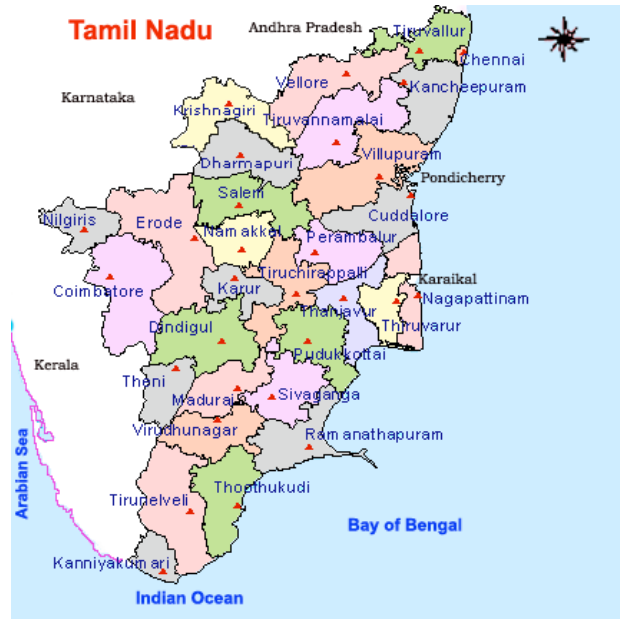
² “Naiyandi.” *Cre-A: Dictionary of Contemporary Tamil (Tamil - Tamil - English)*. 2nd Ed. Published by Cre-A, 2008.

make fun (*naiyānti pannu*) of themselves, each other, the dancers they accompany, and their audiences. Usually humor is expressed as slapstick comedy. Common comedic devices may include (1) blowing a nagaswaram at very close range, at a very loud volume in another musician's face; (2) secretly attaching a bad (cracked) reed to a *nāgaswaram* 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 *nāgaswarams* wildly in the air while playing; (6) poking fun at another musician if he commits an obvious mistake; (7) using extended technique to interject odd sounding squeaks and honks into the performance of a piece (8) and 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 *karagāttam* and *kuruvan kuratti* dancers. Players may also use their instruments in sexually 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

³ Interview with Dr. K.A. Gunasekeran, 2006.

⁴ Naiyandi melam players who are hired to perform at the funerals of higher castes are known to make 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 melam to follow and accompany individual mourners as they arrive at the deceased's house. Though I have never witnessed it myself, musicians are given 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).



Map of Tamil Nadu districts

Geographic Distribution

The nayandi melam is the most well known folk music ensemble of Tamil Nadu. Although nayandi melam musicians can be found in almost every corner of the state, the heart of this music resides in the Southern districts of Thanjavur, Dindigul, Madurai, Pudukkottai, Sivaganga, Virudhunagar, Thoothukudi, Tirunelveli, and Kanniyakumari (see map above). Local history suggests that until the mid-20th century, nayandi melam 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 the great majority have

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migrated to large cities such as Madurai, Tirunelveli, Nagercoil, and Thoothukudi.⁵ The bulk of my fieldwork was conducted in and around the cities of Madurai and Tirunelveli, home to the largest number of naiyandi melam players in the state. Cities offer musicians greater and more lucrative economic opportunities. During the festival season, city-based naiyandi melam musicians will frequently travel to and perform in nearby and distant villages.

Social Makeup: Caste and Class

All naiyandi melam musicians are men from either Backwards Castes (BC), Most Backwards Castes (MBC) and Scheduled Castes (SC). Lakshmanan, a BC tavil player from Tirunelveli once told me in an interview that “these days, members from all communities have taken up this profession.” Over the course of my research alone, I met musicians from Padaiyachi, Konar, Tevar, Yadavar, Aasari, Kamar, Vanniyar, Tondaman, Yogeewaran, Accara, Malchiyam, Chakliyar, and Paraiyar communities. Though they represent a diverse cross-section of Tamil society, all naiyandi melam musicians share one common feature: they are non-Brahmin.

While some of the musicians with whom I spoke claimed that they and their community members were direct descendents of an ancient naiyandi melam heritage, most performers identified the *pulavar* as the ensemble’s original practitioner. In Tamil, *pulavar* is a classical term signifying a poet, especially a poet of great

⁵ Despite the fact that most naiyandi melam musicians live in urban centers, popular representations continue to portray them as rustic villagers.

antiquity. During the Dravidian moment, many scholars of language and literature acquired this honorific as a way of connecting them to the glorious legacy of the Tamil past. By pointing to the shadowy, yet prestigious figure of the *pulavar* as this music ensemble's source and creator, folk musicians draw attention away from their generally low caste status. Interestingly a very similar phenomenon occurred amongst *periya* and *chinna mēlam* musicians in Northern Tamil Nadu during the early part of the 20th century. Men from these *dēvadāsi* communities renounced their caste name because of its negative association with prostitution, replacing it with the more respectable title *isai vēlālar*, or cultivator of music. Though naiyandi melam musicians have not replaced their individual caste names with the word *pulavar*, they may have appropriated this title in an attempt to command respect and legitimize their authority as bearers of a pan-regional (as opposed to local) non-Brahmin Dravidian culture.

The players in a typical naiyandi melam ensemble are all of the same caste. However, inter-caste ensembles are not uncommon. In these groups there 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.⁶

⁶ Dalits, who constitute the majority of naiyandi melam musicians in Tamil Nadu, have their own ensembles in which they play all of the instruments, including the lead *tavil* and *nagaswaram*. 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.

In addition to coming from the lower castes, naiyandi melam musicians also belong to the lower socio-economic strata ~~of class~~. The average daily earning of a naiyandi melam musician is substantial compared to other members of his class. Even the lowest paid performer in an ensemble might earn around Rs. 300-400 in a single evening. That seems quite good when compared to the Rs 150 in daily wages that a night-watchman, hotel waiter, or store clerk might earn. Nonetheless, work as a naiyandi melam musician is often described as difficult and unsteady. During the festival season (February-May), a musician may be hired to play five or six days a week. However, in the off-season, performing opportunities are intermittent and unpredictable, giving musicians much financial hardship and sometimes forcing them to take up second or third jobs.

The Troupe

The instrumentation of the naiyandi melam varies slightly from place to place, and from community to community. In every ensemble a pair of double-reed aerophones, either the *nāgaswaram* or *nāyaṇam* (a shawm slightly shorter than the *nagaswaram*) 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 *nāgaswaram* are also used in “classical” musical ensembles known as *periya mēlam* in Northern Tamil Nadu and *rājā mēlam* in the South.

Repertoire and performance context aside, there are key visual features that differentiate the naiyandi melam from these other ensembles: (1) *periya* and *rājā mēlam* musicians mostly play sitting down while naiyandi 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 naiyandi tavil players hold a thick stick in the weak hand, and a long thin bamboo stick in the dominant;⁷ and (3) classical ensembles, unlike the naiyandi melam do not feature percussionists other than the two tavil players.

Every naiyandi melam includes two supporting percussion instruments whose musical roles are subservient to that of the tavil.⁸ These can be a set of either *pampai* or *urumi*. 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 Chakaliyar 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

⁷ The bamboo stick produces a much more powerful sound than the finger caps, and is said to be one of the naiyandi melam's most distinguishing characteristics

⁸ On occasion there may only be one supporting drummer. However, this type of set-up is very rare.



1 Three naiyandi melam musicians from a *kodai* temple festival in Nagercoil, 2007. From left to right: *nagaswaram*, *tavil*, *pambai*.



2 Three naiyandi melam musicians posing during a *kodai* festival in Kanukumari district, 2007. From left to right: *pombai*, *tavil*, *nagaswaram*.

trance.⁹ Besides the abovementioned six (two *nāgaswaram*, two *tavil*, two *pampai/urumi*) there are occasionally other instruments also incorporated into this

⁹ 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 naiyandi melam performances that included this instrument. All performances transcribed and analyzed feature *pombai* drummers as supporting accompaniment.

ensemble. The *tamukku*, a small kettledrum played with leather straps, is frequently included in Dalit groups. Other notable instruments include finger cymbals (*jāḷra*) for keeping *tāḷa* and a drone-type instrument such as an electronic *śruti* box or harmonium.¹⁰ Each of these instruments requires the presence of an additional performer (including the electronic *śruti* box which is held around the neck). A student of one of the main performers typically fills this role.

Performance Settings

The naiyandi melam 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 naiyandi melam performances however, take place during temple festivals known as *kotai* and *tiruvizha*.¹¹ These events are usually held annually and take place over the course of one to three days.¹² During the festival, a variety of offerings—possibly 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 naiyandi melam, sometimes along with another folk ensemble, is typically hired to provide ritual services and entertainment for these

¹⁰ In the past, the *ottu* (short double reed nagaswaram 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.

¹¹ The *kotai* (offering) is usually celebrated for local deities while *tiruvizha* refers to festivals celebrating more pan-Indian gods.

¹² On rare occasion the *kotai* can be much longer, taking place over the course of 10-15 days.

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events. Their role in the ritual context of performance is crucial, as it is the naiyandi melam that helps to call upon and eventually summon a god or goddess into the body of a designated human medium.¹³ Musically, possession is marked by a very distinct *mettu* (melodic tune) and *ādi* (rhythmic ostinato). The moment of possession is so ritually important and powerful that the performance of anything else (a cinema song or another folk *mettu* etc.) could be extremely dangerous.

Accompanying possession (in any situation) requires the naiyandi melam 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 naiyandi melam artist, it constitutes a very small percentage of actual performance. During the *kotai*, *tiruvizha* and other Hindu religious festivals, the naiyandi melam spends most of its time either playing in processions or performing “staged” concerts in village squares and city blocks. It is within these contexts that the *ensemble* will play cinema songs and show off *their* skills in Carnatic music.

Musicians also devote much of their time to 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 naiyandi melam might provide accompaniment include: *karagāttam* (pot dance), *kāvaṭi āttam* (dance associated with the god Murugan, in which dancers

¹³ Within the *kotai*, 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).

balance a wooden burden on their shoulders), *poy kāl kutirai* (hobby horse dance), *mayil āttam* (peacock dance), *matṭu āttam* (bullock dance), *rājā rāni āttam* (king and queen dance), and *kuravan-kuratti* (a parody of gypsy/tribal dance). Each type of dance is closely associated with its own specific folk *mettu* and *ādi*. Once the mood (*surṇilai*) of the dance has been established by its appropriate *mettu*, the naiyandi melam will usually go on to play a medley of devotional and popular film songs.¹⁴

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Overture

While it is difficult to know exactly when naiyandi melam musicians began including film songs in their repertoire, performers seem to agree that the practice developed shortly after the introduction of sound to cinema in 1931. Today, nearly eighty-percent of a typical naiyandi melam concert features the performance of film music. The average naiyandi melam player knows anywhere from one thousand to two 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, ‘50s and ‘60s have become standard repertoire, passed down from generation to generation through oral modes of teaching and transmission. Knowledge of more recent songs, however, is less standardized and may differ from individual to individual or group to group.

¹⁴ Sometimes, though not always, these film songs will directly or tangentially relate to the dance form itself. For example, I once witnessed a *kuruvan kurutti* performance in which the musicians cleverly worked in a tribal sounding song from the M.G.R. hit ‘*Nan Yen Piranden?*,’ This was greatly appreciated by the audience, for whom this song recalled the exaggerated and exoticized tribal dancing depicted in the film.

Naiyandi melam 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; attending the performances of other naiyandi melam musicians; and downloading film songs as ringtones on cell phones.

Many naiyandi melam players view learning cinema songs through electronic media as a modern adaptation of “traditional” practice. Lakshmanan (tavil) 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.”¹⁵

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

Remediating Film Songs; The Expression of Multiple Musical Affinities

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¹⁵ Interview Lakshmanan

“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. Manuel describes the homogenizing effects of the Indian film industry on folk music practice, lamenting how film musics 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 1992:160).

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 aptly points out, also has the potential to enrich local traditions, exposing folk artists to a broader range of cultural forms, genres, and styles (Manuel 1993:8). Paul Greene in his research on commercial cassette recordings in a Tamil village also 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” (Greene 1995:8).

Despite film music's hegemonizing and homogenizing power, naiyandi melam 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, Naiyandi melam 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 naiyandi melam'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 Nagumomu

Contrary to stereotypes that portray folk musicians as located outside upper-class cultural spaces, naiyandi melam players regularly borrow from the sounds and styles of the elite. An analysis of a naiyandi melam performance of the well-known

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Carnatic composition Nagumomu 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 *tiruvizha* just outside Madurai, I heard a friend's naiyandi melam 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:

Aaron: Sir, do you know what the name of this song is?

Devotee: Tillana Moghanambal. It is a Sivaji Ganeshan song.

Aaron: Is it **carnatic** music?

Devotee: No, it is a Sivaji Ganesahan song. A film song.

Aaron: 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 Tillana Moghanambal.

Aaron: It's a film song? not **Carnatic** music?

Devotee: Yes. It is a film song but it has a **Carnatic** style.

Thoroughly confused, I decided not to pursue the conversation any further. During a performance break later in the evening, I approached my friend Kumaresan (nagaswaram) in the naiyandi melam and asked him about the song they had played earlier. He replied that the song's name was Nagumomu, and that it was a Carnatic composition by Saint Thyagaraja. When I mentioned that an audience member had misled me to believe that it was a film song, Kumaresan chuckled and remarked [in English] "it is a two in one" and went on to explain how Thyagaraja's Nagumomu was also the tile-song of the hit-movie Tillana Moghanambal (1968), starring Sivaji Ganeshan.

Nagumomu is a favorite amongst naiyandi melam players because its performance generates multiple layers of socio-cultural and historical association.

Kumaresan, for instance, explained that whenever he performs Nagumomu, he is reminded of (1) the film song, (2) the Tyagaraja composition, and (3) the performances of great nagaswaram players from the past, like Rajarattinam Pillai and his disciple Karukurichi Arunachalam.¹⁶

Rajarattinam Pillai was probably the most iconic *nāgaswaram* player of the 20th century. He was also the historical figure upon which Sivaji's character in Tillana Moganambal is modeled. In addition to his acclaimed virtuosity on the nagaswaram, Rajarattinam was widely recognized for his determination to achieve greater respect for *periya mēlam* musicians. Anecdotes about his refusal to play shirtless, his insistence on sitting while performing, and his refusal to wear his hair in the traditional *kuṭumi* style are well known in folk music circles, and are cited frequently by naiyandi melam players (Terada 2000:477). In adopting selective visual and performative aspects of karnatak music, Rajarattinam, a non-Brahmin *isai vēḷālar* musician, challenged Brahmin restrictions placed on the *periya mēlam* and helped to legitimize it as a classical tradition.

Karukurichi Arunachalam, the other person mentioned by Kumaresan, also deserves some explication here. For Kumaresan and the Yogeewarar community from which he comes, Arunachalam is remembered as the naiyandi melam performer, who through an encounter with Rajarattinam Pillai, was able to cross over from naiyandi melam to *periya mēlam* performance. In one of our interview's Kuramesan recounted the nature of this meeting:

¹⁶ Interview Kumaresan 7/30/1008 (author's translation)

“Once Rajarattinam Pillai was supposed to play 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 Rajaratnam. Rather than play naiyandi melam, 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 *kīrtanai*. That really impressed Rajarattinam Pillai.”¹⁷

In performing a classical song from Tillana Moganambal, Kumaresan 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 karnatak classical music, Kumaresan’s appropriation of Nagumomu participates in a subversive cultural politics of his own. Via film, he and his folk ensemble cleverly re-mediate a classical karnatak composition into their naiyandi melam performance.¹⁸ At the same time, because of the film’s association with the nagaswaram player Rajarattinam Pillai, Kumaresan situates his performance of Nagumomu within a distinctly non-Brahmin ideological framework, thus claiming this classical karnatak song as part of his own heritage and tradition.

Re-mediating The Folk: Performing the Self

¹⁷ Interview Kumaresan 7/30/2008

¹⁸ Rarely do naiyandi melam musicians play Carnatic compositions that do not appear in film. The reasons for this may be two-fold: (1) naiyandi melam 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.

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 centre 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 1992:165).

While some naiyandi melam 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, naiyandi melam 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. Pichai Mani, a tavil player from Madurai, describes the circulation of ideas between the naiyandi melam 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. Naiyandi melam 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 the unequal distribution of power within which this relationship is situated. ~~Cases where~~ 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 re-claim and re-present film songs in their own performances, according to their own agendas.

~~In my research,~~ I have found that naiyandi melam 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 (Ilaiyaraja's sons) consider folk songs important enough to represent in their film scores, naiyandi melam musicians often play these songs in their own performances. They also praise these filmic versions of folk songs for their *iyalbāna* (natural) and *negimāna* (authentic) folk quality.¹⁹ Saravanan, a nagaswaram 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."²⁰

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.

Remediated within the performances of the naiyandi melam however, these cinematic folk songs are transformed into recognizably different musical products.

¹⁹ Please note that all of the film songs looked at in Chapter Two were written by music directors in the time preceding Ilaiyaraja's entry into the film industry. After Ilaiyaraja the representation of Tamil folk music in film was radically transformed. Ilaiyaraja has been hailed as the first cinema director to write authentic sounding folk music especially when compared to the stereotyped and stuffy representations of folk music favored by earlier composers. 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

²⁰ Interview Saravanan 7/30/2008

Despite the fact that naiyandi melam musicians extol Ilaiyaraja’s folk music for its faithfulness and authenticity, ~~when performing his songs,~~ musicians make considerable and significant changes to them. Rather than attempt to reproduce a perfect duplicate of an Ilaiyaraja song, naiyandi melam players take pleasure in refashioning them according to their own distinctive tastes and aesthetic devices.

~~To highlight this phenomenon,~~ consider a naiyandi melam performance of Ilaiyaraja’s hit song Annakili (1976). A comparison of a naiyandi melam performance of this song to the original film version will highlight some of the major changes that it has undergone in its reproduction (For the following section please listen to CD tracks 1 and 2).

In the film rendition of Annakili each chorus is separated by a long and elaborate melodic interlude, featuring musical instruments such as the *santūr*, flute, and string orchestra. In the naiyandi melam’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.²¹

~~, the naiyandi melam’s performance of Annakili also differs Rhythmically~~ from the original. In Ilaiyaraja’s version a *tabla* accompanies the song, alternating between two ostinato patterns:

1	2	3	1	2	3
tom -	ta -	tom -	tom -	ta -	tom -
- -	x -	- -	- -	x -	- -

²¹ Folk musicians frequently use the term *mettu* when referring to the melodies of cinema songs. One musician might for example, instruct another to “play the Annakili *mettu*.”

o o o o

and

1 2 3 1 2 3
 ||tom - |ta - |ta ta ||tom - |ta - |ta ta
 || - - |x - |x x || - - |x - |x x
 o o o o

Although it would be possible to represent Ilaiyaraja's song as a four beat ostinato, three feels more natural, especially since the drum pattern places a strong emphasis on beats one and two. Contrarily, in the naiyandi melam's rendition, the melody is accompanied by rhythmic ostinatos with a very strong triple-duple feel, much more typical of actual folk music performance (please see examples below).

1 2 3 4
 ||jo - gu |na ku ku |na jo jo | - jo -
 ||x x x |x x x |x x x |x x x
 o x o o o

1 2 3 4
 ||jo - gu |na jo - |jo - gu |na jo -
 ||x - x |x - x |x - x |x - x
 o o o o

The last noteworthy modification of the naiyandi melam's performance has to do with tempo. The tempo of Ilaiyaraja's song remains constant from beginning to end. However, in typical naiyandi melam fashion, Saravanan's group periodically increases the speed of the song until it approaches double the original tempo. These

tempo changes transform Ilayaraja's composition, with its somber tone and lyrics of unrequited love and longing, into a lighthearted and danceable folk tune.²²

In the hands of the naiyandi melam, cinema songs like Annakili are important sources of empowerment and legitimization. Naiyandi melam musicians often complain **of the fact** 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. Kumaresan notes:

"Naiyandi melam 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."²³

Not being able to play traditional folk tunes (*rājāpāṭṭu*, *kāvāṭi chintu*, *temmāngu*, *vīrapāndiya katabomman*, *nōndi chindu*) as often as they would like, cinema songs, especially folk songs from the cinema, constitute an alternative channel through which naiyandi melam artists can articulate their identity as *marabupūrvamāna nāṭṭapura kalaingarghal* or "traditional folk artists."

By re-presenting film's representations of their own folk musics, naiyandi melam 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), films songs, when used by naiyandi musicians, become vehicles for self-

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Comment: bad sentence structure

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Comment: re-presenting representations? eek

²² During the performance of this piece a group of teenage boys exuberantly danced alongside the processing melam.

²³ Interview Kumaresan

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 (Benjamin 1936).²⁴

Film Songs and the Entertaining of Audiences

So far I have discussed the ways in which naiyandi melam 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 naiyandi melam plays, the audience must understand everything. For example, when the procession goes around the temple with *pal kudam* (milk pot) on their heads, at that time we must play the *naiyandi 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 *adi*. Valliyur district...and Tirunelveli have their own *adis*. In Rajapalliyam, Sivelliputtur, 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 *itamporul*. 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 *mahudi* melodies, we also have to play *mahudi* melodies. In other places we will have to play the *naiyandi mettu*. In some places we'll have to play *killikanni* (a type of chidu 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 Thevar caste". That's an example of a Muthuramalingam Thevar song that we will definitely have to play. There are also Kartik [the name of a famous Thevar actor] songs. [Sings] "In the Land of Tirunelveli"...we will have to play all of these types of songs. All Thevars will know these cinema songs and will desire to hear them. If we go to an area where Nadars live, we will have to play songs from Sarat Kumar [a very politically involved Nadar actor] films. We will also play songs from Ramarajan, another Nadar actor's films. Our job is to play whatever type of film song catches their *manam* [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

²⁴ Consider the ways in which naiyandi melam folk musicians use film songs to introduce aspects of classicism into their performances.

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 melam definitely has to play in a way that reflects the *itamporul*. That is an important rule for being a naiyandi melam performer.

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

The re-mediation of film songs is a useful tool for naiyandi melam players, especially when they are performing for new audiences in unknown places. In recent years with the support of the Tamil Nadu government, the naiyandi melam has become something of a cultural export. While in the past most naiyandi melams did not travel beyond the southern districts of Tamil Nadu, more and more groups are now travelling nationally and internationally. Not necessarily familiar with the folk music styles and practices of these new places, naiyandi melam musicians mostly play film songs in order to help them connect with these foreign audiences. For example, when a Madurai based naiyandi melam 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.

Naiyandi melam 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 *itamporul*

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Comment: way too many “nayandi melams.” mix it up

(see example above). When translated into English, *itamporul* means something akin to ‘circumstance’ or ‘context.’ These terms however, do not adequately capture *itamporul*’s full semantic range. A combination of the words *itam*, meaning place, and *porul*, meaning significance or substance, *itamporul* 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 *kunam* or intrinsic character of the audience in attendance.

With an awareness and understanding of *itamporul* naiyandi melam musicians can fashion performances so that they that are *poruttam* (fitting), *ottuvaratal* (appropriate), and *murai* (correct) for the specific social, cultural, and political dispositions of their varied listeners. Hence, when performing for a predominantly Thevar or Nadar community, a naiyandi melam would likely play songs from films featuring Thevar and Nadar actors correspondingly. Similarly, if a naiyandi melam were playing for a Murugan temple festival, musicians would play cinema songs that somehow refer to the god Murugan in their lyrics or visual imagery.

Underlying the naiyandi melam’s performance of film musics is a sensitivity to the emotional needs, political orientations, and social positions of their audience. Every naiyandi melam 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 naiyandi melam were to play a song from a film starring MG Ramachandran (the founder of the ADMK party) 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 ADMK supporters in attendance, this same song would be heartily welcomed.

When naiyandi melam 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 in relationship to different communities.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the ways in which some naiyandi melam musicians actively incorporate varied mediated musical forms into their lives. As musicians who perform for a diverse array of situations, for different classes and castes of people, naiyandi melam players equip themselves with a huge repertoire of styles and songs. Film music offers these musicians a wide selection of sounds, styles, and genres to draw from, all of which encode multiple layers of meaning. Not simply representing a musical culture to and for itself, the naiyandi melam communicates complex forms of expression that cannot incontrovertibly be reduced to narrow definitions of “folk.” In their performances, these artists constantly negotiate among different music genres, as we have seen, often giving preference to non-folk sounds and styles.

