

Abstract

PERSPECTIVES ON THE USES AND FUNCTIONS OF CHENTA ENSEMBLES IN THE RELIGIOUS FESTIVAL PROCESSIONS OF KERALA, INDIA

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This study seeks to better understand the uses and functions of chenta drum ensembles in the religious festivals of Kerala, India, along with the social structures that must be in place in order for these drummers to move seamlessly between different religious and social contexts. The chenta (çența), a double-headed cylindrical drum that is popular throughout Kerala, is an aural symbol for Keralites that signifies celebration, announcement and royalty. I will analyze two types of chenta ensembles (mēļams) in terms of instrumentation, repertoire, history/development, and context — traditional chenta melams, which can be further divided into large and small melams, and a new chenta performance style, shinkari melam (šinkāri mēļam). I also will look at the ways that status and accessibility of these melams are often determined by larger social structures and concepts that are tied to colonial, post-colonial, and caste realities in India, and how these issues are often most evidenced in discourses that seek to attach genre labels to these performance styles. Although many would say that chenta ensembles are rooted in Hindu temple tradition, and most drummers are Hindus, the churches and mosques have also been using these ensembles in their own processions. I will explore the different ways that religion based ethnic groups use the chenta to negotiate group identity: specifically, how Hindu, Christian, and Muslim religion-based ethnic groups use the sound and associations of the chenta as a means to create a sense of communitas, building bridges between otherwise divided segments of the population and bringing the people of Kerala together through shared sonic experiences. By intentionally seeking out multiple perspectives regarding caste, appropriateness, preference, and motivation this dissertation sheds light on the uses and functions of chenta ensembles within the festivals of these religious communities. This study also offers insight into the lives of the performers from their own perspectives, and is concerned with how religious festival participants feel and think about the issues currently facing both hereditary and non-hereditary chenta ensemble performance traditions.

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