

MURAI – The Right to Perform

'Intangible Cultural Heritage' Project to research, document, safeguard and revitalize music and dance performed by the hereditary community of Melakkarar in and outside Hindu temples of Tamilnadu, South India – Project proposal/ realisation

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Introduction: Worship in Hindu temples has been framed by ritual music and dance since time immemorial. '**MURAI**' intends to research, document and support the **historical presence** of music and dance performed by *melakkarar*. Family repertoires, their manuscripts, oral histories and contemporary *praxes* form its point of departure.

* General appreciation of ritual music and dance has differed through the ages. In the case of ritual dance it reached its lowest point in 1947 when - three months after India's Independence - dance in temples was forbidden by law. The *Devadasi Act* coincided with the forceful transfer of this ritual, female heritage to a secular national and global stage. This process continues to affect the entire community of *cinna melam* ('small band') and *periya melam* ('big band'). Today, ritual dance music can be heard only in *mangalavadya* 'auspicious instruments' of the *nagasvaram* but dance is no longer to be seen in worship.

* The proposed project aims to **safeguard** the heritage of musical practices by *melakkarar* for posterity through several media: firstly by **recording** and **editing** their repertoire to enhance **public awareness** of the central importance of *nagasvaram* music in Hindu rituals, and in the history of Indian music. Secondly, by sharing its findings through lectures, workshops and other media. Thirdly, by experimental adaptations of *melakkarar* music for dance in a contemporary local and (inter)national stage format. As a result, a **new relevance, vitality** and thereby **sustained interest** in the well-being of these local, professional communities should emerge.

Planning: '**MURAI – The Right to Perform**' envisages four phases. The first three deal with its textual layers that are still embedded in living cultural practices, while the fourth phase addresses their revitalized performance in today's (broader) public spheres:

. **Phase I. 'OLAI – manuscripts'** intends to transcribe primary data found in two *melakkarar* family manuscripts and record their contemporary musical praxis.

. **Phase II. 'ILAKKIYAM' – text and context'** seeks to recover (con)textual data through secondary sources. Dance texts that have been rendered only partially in manuscripts and praxis, will be reconstructed and recorded in their living context. Texts, audio and visual data will be edited in DVD format in close collaboration with *Melakkarar communities*.

. **Phase III. MURAI – the Right to Perform: monograph and DVD**

Together, Phase I .and II. should result in a *Monograph* on the heritage of *Cinna Melam* and *Periya Melam communities* with the above mentioned audio/visual *DVD* enclosed.

On the basis of these textual, oral, musical and dance data phase IV is envisaged:

. **Phase IV. 'PRAYOGAM – Application'** invites contemporary performing artists to choreograph dance compositions that are still musically rendered by *melakkarar*. An intensive period of workshops *in situ* , should result in new collaborations and performances on both local and urban stages. Local, national and international support is sought in applying at UNESCO for nomination of **Melakkarar Community Arts** as '**Intangible Cultural Heritage**' (ICHC, 2007 www.unesco.org/culture/ich)

Project Break Down: MURAI Phases I, II and III

Phase I. 'OLAI – Manuscripts'; project description:

I.1. primary data: transcription from repertoire manuscripts in Sanskrit, Tamil and Telugu and from living *praxes*. Family manuscripts that underlie Hindu ritual praxis have been given to Dr. Saskia Kersenboom in the course of her longstanding studies with *devadasis* and *melakkarar* musicians:



I.1.a. The Subburatnamma manuscript deals with the *Cinna Melam* family repertoire of *devadasis* of the Shri Subrahmanyasvami temple of Tiruttani (Tamilnadu, North Arcot). One hundred-and-fifty compositions were noted down by Smt. Subburatnamma (1871-1950) and taught to her granddaughter Smt. P. Ranganayaki (1914-2005). Fifty songs and dances were practiced by Smt.P. Ranganayaki until 1947 within temple ritual; she taught these composition to Dr. Saskia Kersenboom between 1977 and 1987 (see Photo above, after Lecture Demonstration at Music Academy, Chennai, 02.01.1988, L.to R: Dr. Arudra, Dr. Saskia Kersenboom and Smt. P. Ranganayaki). These textual and recorded data will be compared by her and interrelated with:



I.1.b. Manuscripts from the only remaining *Periya Melam* family of the Shri Tyagarajasvami Temple in Tiruvarur (Tamilnadu, Cholamandalam). Tiruvarur is the birthplace of South India's three classical composers and an early centre of standardization of classical music and dance.

Shri T.K.Celvaganapati (*1926-) and T.C.Palaniyappan (*1965-) are the eleventh and twelfth generation of *nagasvaram* players still practicing in Tiruvarur temple (see Photo above: after performance during Ponkal celebrations in Shri Tyagarajasvami temple in Tiruvarur, L.to R: Shri. T.C. Palaniyappan, Shri T.K. Celvaganapati, Dr. Saskia Kersenboom, Mr. A. Szörös).

Today, they follow their manuscripts in part only. Among some two-hundred compositions in Tamil, Telugu and Sanskrit, are many *padams* and *padavarnams*. Until recently these were meant to accompany dance by *Cinna Melam devadasis*.



I.2. fieldwork I: December 2010- January 2011 in Tiruttani and Tiruvarur will seek to *a)* distinguish a general repertoire that is still performed by both groups of *periya melam* *nagasvaram* musicians in daily and festival ritual, as well as *b)* trace specific compositions for dance by *cinna melam devadasis*. Examples from both repertoires will be audio and video recorded in the course of two periods of fieldwork.

Phase II. 'ILAKKIYAM – text and context'; project description:

II.1. Emendation, analysis and translation of selected texts for publication

II.2. Secondary literature will contextualize the analysis of primary and performance data from both repertoires, in the history of the performing arts in Tamilnadu. Treatises on music and dance will be studied in order to reconstruct missing parts in a number of texts as found in both manuscripts.

II.3. Fieldwork II: *a)* Tanjavur and Chennai: textual and contextual research for reconstruction of texts in libraries and private collections. *b)* Tiruvarur and environments: continued work with *nagasvaram* musicians to reconstruct *cinna melam* and *periya melam* repertoire in daily and festival ritual.

Phase III. 'MURAI –The Right to Perform': monograph and DVD enclosed

III.1. Preparation of the copy-text for the monograph *MURAI –the Right to Perform* for publication, in correlation with DVD.

III.2. Design and Scripting DVD

III.3. Fieldwork III: *a)* Tanjavur, Chennai libraries and private collections contd: final (con)textual database. *b)* Filming of Tiruvarur Brahmotsava ritual for DVD in collaboration with IGNCA MultiMedia Laboratory.

III.4. Production of interactive DVD at IGNCA, Multi Media Laboratory, New Delhi.

Project Break Down: MURAI Phase IV-. 'PRAYOGAM – Application';

tentative project description:

IV.1. Artistic collaborations, workshops, community work and outreach under multilateral negotiation with Melakkarar communities, Hindu temples, contemporary performing artists, cultural organizations and platforms.

IV.2. Collaboration of partners towards UNESCO application for nomination of Melakkarar Community Arts as Intangible Cultural Heritage.

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