

Garland Encyclopedia of World Music

Kerala Tribal Music

TRIBAL MUSIC

There are thirty-five tribes in Kerala, each with its own language and music. Most of these tribes live in cluster-houses called Ur, in the mountainous regions of Wynad, Palakkad, and Idikki districts. Music and dance are part of their daily lives. Women, men, and children sing and dance together. Musical instruments are played only by men. Brisk rhythm, greater use of drums in comparison with wind and string instruments, call-response style of singing in unison, and a limited number of melodic patterns that are used for almost all occasions are some of the general characteristics of the tribal music in Kerala.

Death and the annual festival at the local temple are the most important occasions that call for singing and dancing with instrumental accompaniment. Among the tribes in Attappady, in Palakkad district, death is announced by a special beating on two drums, pera and davil. Men and women dance around the corpse that is placed in the courtyard of the Ur. The dance begins with rhythmic reproduction of sounds and vocables followed by songs with meaningful texts. This continues until the corpse is buried. Anniversaries of death are also occasions for grand celebrations. Wedding and the first menstruation of a girl may or may not be celebrated with singing and dancing.

The instrumental ensemble of the tribes in Attappady consists of two drums -- pera and davil-- and a reed (wind) instrument made of wood, called kokal. Among the three, pera, a two-sided, high-pitch drum made of clay with the two sides covered with cow-skin, enjoys

higher status. Davil provides the bass element, and kokal doubles the melody on the upper octave. The instrumentalists stand inside the circle formed by the dancers, who sing and clap hands while moving clockwise and anti-clockwise. The text of the songs are full of imageries from the nature around. The music is strictly metrical and contains simple melodic phrases of four or eight beats. During festival seasons, singing and dancing that start in the evening may go up to the early hours in the morning.

FILM AND THEATER MUSIC

Film is the most popular form of entertainment in Kerala. Seventy-five to hundred films in Malayalam are released every year. Songs and dances are essential elements for the success of a film. There may be three to five songs in a movie. About hundred and thirty-five music directors, all men, some of whom are from other states, work for Malayalam film industry. It is in the films that every genre of music --from Indian classical and folk to Western pop and rap-- finds a niche. However, almost ninety-eight percent of the film songs have the same format of three stanzas of four lines interspersed with instrumental interludes between stanzas. Western musical instruments are used for the orchestration of the songs. Duration of a song may go up to five minutes. Film songs get the maximum televising and broadcasting time in Kerala as elsewhere in India. They are also released in pre-recorded cassettes, and lately, compact discs. Popularity of play-back singers is second only to movie actors and actresses.

The influence of film music is no where as conspicuous as in



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the theater music of Kerala. There are about fifty touring theaters, all of which produce one play every year. As in the movies, a play may have three to five songs. Since 1980, many of the professional drama companies have adopted play-back singing instead of live performance of songs. Background music, too, is pre-recorded.

REFERENCE

Nair, Madhusudanan B. 1994. Malayala chalachitra sangeetham 50 varsham: chitragana smaranika (fifty years of Malayalam film music: a souvenir of film songs). Kollam: published by the author.



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