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Ancient South Indian Musical Instruments

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Abstract:

India's rich cultural diversity has greatly contributed to various forms of folk music and folk dance. Music and Dance have always been an important aspects in the lives of Indian people. India's rich cultural diversity has greatly contributed to various forms of folk music and folk dance. Tamil culture is the culture of the Tamil people. Tamil culture is rooted in the arts and ways of life of Tamil.

Folk music is closely associated with farming and other such professions and evolved to alleviate the hardship and break the monotony of the routine life. Even though folk music lost its popularity with the advent of contemporary music like pop and rap, but no traditional festival or celebration is complete without folk music.

Tamil culture is the culture of the Tamil people. Tamil culture is rooted in the arts and ways of life of Tamils in India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Singapore across the globe. Tamil culture is expressed in language, literature, music, dance, theatre, folk arts, folk Instruments, martial arts, painting, sculpture, architecture,

Sports, media, comedy, cuisine, costumes, celebrations, philosophy, Religions, traditions, rituals, organizations, science, and technology.

Key words- Tamil culture, South Indian Musical instruments, Nadaswaram, Yazh, Murasu,



Introduction

Tamil country has its own music form called Tamil Pannisai, from which current Carnatic music evolved. Music was an integral part of the Tamil Culture. In tamil culture musical instruments play a vital role, which brings happiness and togetherness between the people. The compositions of the Tamil Saiva saints such as [Appar](#), [SivaPrakasar](#), [ThirugnanaSambanthar](#) and [Manikkavasagar](#) establish musically which prevailed during the [Hindu](#) revival period between the 6th and the 10th century. Let's see some of the traditional south Indian musical instruments here.

Yazh

Poems of the Sangam literature contain numerous mentions of the various musical instruments such as the Seerkazhi, a **stringed instrument of the [Veena](#) type** and various percussion instruments such as murasu or muzham. Pattupattu contains a description of the [yazh](#), a stringed instrument. **There were two types of yaazh, Periyaazh or the 'large yaazh' contained 21 strings, whereas its more compact companion Siriyaazh had only seven strings.**

The Tamil poet [Thiruvalluvar](#) mentions yazh in his work [Thirukkural](#) also called as ulagapodhumarai.

1. குழல்இனிதுயாழ்இனிதுஎன்பதம்மக்கள்
மழலைச்சொல்கேளாதவர்.

பொருள்

தங்களுக்குழந்தைகளின்மழலைச்சொல்லைக்கேட்காதவர்கள்தான்குழலோசை, யாழோசைஆகியஇரண்டும்இனிமையானவைஎன்றுகூறுவார்கள்.

Tamil Transliteration



KuzhallnidhuYaazhinidhuEnpadhamMakkal
MazhalaichcholKelaaThavar.

Kural 279- koodaazhukkam

2. கணைகொடிதுயாழ்கோடுசெவ்விதுஆங்கன்ன
வினைபடுபாலால்கொளல்.

Tamil Transliteration

kaNaikotidhuyaazhkoadusevvidhuaanGkanna
vinaipatupaalaalkoLal

Meaning in English :

Cruel is the arrow straight, the crooked lute is sweet,
Judge by their deeds the many forms of men you meet.

Many major Tamil classical literary masterpieces written during [Sangam period](#) have mentioned the yazh. [Silappatikaram](#), written by a Tamil Chera prince [IlangoAdigal](#), mentions four kinds of yazhs, *Periyazh* – 21 strings, *Makarayazh* – 19 strings, *Cakotayazh* – 14 strings, *Cenkottiyazh* – 7 strings



பருவக்கொண்மூப்படியெனப்பாவலர்க்
குரிமையின்உரிமையின்உதவிஒளிதிகழ்
குருமாமதிபுரைகுலவியகுடைக்கீழ்ச்
செருமாஉகைக்குஞ்சேரலன்காண்க
பண்பாலியாழ்பயில்பாணபத்திரன்



It was mentioned in [ShaivaThirumurai](#) 11th Pathigam. It was also played by the musician and poet *Panapathirar* (பாணபத்திரர்) who is mentioned in religious devotional stories.

All these literary works prove the existence of Yazh during the olden days.

Murasu

The murasu is a type of drum that originated in [Tamil Nadu](#), [India](#) several centuries ago.

Three types of Murasu are known.

- VeeraMurasu (martial drum), a kettle drum used for military purposes. It may be mounted on a tall platform called a MurasuKattil.
- ThyagaMurasu (charity drum), a drum used when giving gifts, also used to invite poor people to receive goods.
- NyāyaMurasu (judgement drum), a drum used to call people to judicial proceedings or to submit their grievances requiring judgement.
- Now a day's murasu is seen as temple automatic drum with a bell and it is used during harathi time in Hindu temples. In those days it was noticeable.
- One of the election symbol is Murasu these days. See how they have perceived their thought to use it. I think they used it in the concept of NyayaMurasu





Nadaswaram

The nadaswaram, nadhaswaram, nagaswaram, nagasvaram is a [double reed wind instrument](#) from [South India](#) . It is used as a traditional [classical](#) instrument in Tamilnadu. In South Indian culture, the nadaswaram is considered to be very auspicious, and it is a key musical instrument played in almost all [Hindu](#) weddings and temples of the South Indian tradition. It is part of the family of instruments known as [mangalavadyam](#) (lit. mangala ["auspicious"], vadya ["instrument"]). The instrument is usually played in pairs, and accompanied by a pair of drums called [thavil](#); it can also be accompanied with a drone from a similar oboe called the [ottu](#). Nadaswaram is referred in many ancient [Tamil texts](#).

[Silappatikaram](#) refers to an instrument called "vangiyam". The structure of this instrument matches that of Nadaswaram.

The nadaswaram is highly suited for raga alapana (improvised swara elaborations of the raga) and the subtle gamakam (ornamentation) unique to Karnatik music.

During temple and wedding processions, artists render the raga alapana at great length.





Urumi

The urumi also known as urumee is a double-headed hourglass-shaped [drum](#) from the state of [Tamil Nadu](#), [South India](#). Two skin heads are attached to a single hollow, often intricately carved wooden shell. The preferred wood is jackwood, although other woods like rosewood may be used. Both left and right heads are usually made from cow hide that is stretched around a thin metal ring (sometimes lizard skin is used for the right head).

This drum is widely believed to possess supernatural and sacred powers. When played in religious ceremonies and processions, the performance of specific beats on the urumi may induce spirit possessions or [Trance](#). The urumi is also played in the South Indian state of Kerala, which borders Tamil Nadu. The urumi is most often performed in two types of ensembles:

- UrumiMelam
- NaiyandiMelam

Urumimelam ensembles usually consists of double-reed instruments [Nadaswaram](#), a pair of double headed drums called pambai, and one to three urumi drums; this particular ensemble is associated exclusively with funerals and other inauspicious occasions. The naiyandimelam is the most common type of folk ensemble associated with ritual and dance



Thavil

Thavil is a barrel-shaped [percussion instrument](#) from [Tamil Nadu](#). It is used in temple, [folk](#) and [Carnatic music](#), often accompanying the [nadaswaram](#). The thavil and the nadaswaram are essential components of traditional festivals and ceremonies in South India. **Thavil is a traditional musical instrument of the**



ancient city of Thanjavur in Tamil Nadu. It is an integral part of the Carnatic music in Thanjavur. It is mostly made in Thanjavur and Valayapatti. Traditionally, a nadaswaram-thavil concert is used as the opening performance.



Ekkalam

Ekkalam is a trumpet made of brass or copper. It consists of four valves that are fastened to each other, with a bell at one end. The sound emanating from it is produced by the vibration caused when the performer blows it. The pitch is changed by altering the lip tension and the power of air blown into it.

In the ancient folk art form Ekkalakuthu, the artistes would dance while playing this instrument. Thotipatinayakars used to play this instrument at weddings and other social functions. Now the Ekkalakuthu does not exist. **Ekkalam was used when people went for hunting and while bringing the animal that was hunted in a procession.**





Parai

The instrument has — for time immemorial — been associated with the Dalit community. Resembling a flat board, cut from the wood of a neem tree and in the shape of an arc, the parai is a hollow drum played by two sticks of different length and thickness.

The parai is slung by a strap over one shoulder (weak/off hand side) and is held vertically by pushing it towards the performer's body. This simple harness allows the drummer to play while standing, walking, or dancing. The Parai is played entirely with two sticks- Adikuchi and Sundu Kuchi.

Just before the commencement of every performance, drummers will heat the Parai, holding them extremely close to a small bonfire, so that the heat absorbs the moisture in the drum heads and tightens them considerably. After heating, the drums produce a high pitched loud cracking sound when struck.

Usually accompanied by a dance called attam — the performance called paraiattam — the instrument has been around for centuries and has been played in the courts of the Cholas and the Pandiyans.

Parai has been an instrumental part of the people's life. In Tamil, the word parai means 'to speak' or 'to tell'. It was performed in the courts of Sangam, Chola, and Pandiyana rulers. The drums were used to announce important messages and orders of the great Tamil Kings.

In olden days, **parai was used for multiple reasons**, ranging from **warning people about the upcoming war**, requesting the civilians to leave the battlefield, announcing victory or defeat, stopping a breach of water body, **gathering farmers for farming activities**, warning the wild animals about people's presence, during festivals, wedding, celebrations, worship of nature and so on.



Udukkai

The udukkai, udukai or udukku is a member of the family of [membranophone](#) Percussion instruments of India and Nepal used in [folk music](#) and prayers in [Tamil Nadu](#). It is made of wood or brass and is very portable. The drums are an ancient design of hourglass drums similar to the northern [damaru](#) and southern [idakka](#). Its shape is similar to other Indian [hourglass drums](#), having a small snare stretched over one side. They are played with the bare hand, and the pitch may be altered by squeezing the lacing in the middle. It is made of wood or brass and is very portable. **It originated in [Tamil Nadu](#) as well.** This armpit drum is suspended by means of a strap from the percussionist's left shoulder. The right hand strikes the skin while the left hand ensures the variations in tension by tightening the central part of the rope covered with a wide cotton strip.



Morsing

A morsing (also mukharshanku, mourching, morching or morchang) is an instrument similar to the [Jew's harp](#), mainly used in [Rajasthan](#), in the [Carnatic](#)



[music](#) of [South India](#), and in [Sindh](#), Pakistan. An instrument with a history of 1500 years, and in India it is found mainly in [South India](#). In South India, it features in Carnatic concerts and percussion ensembles. It is said to be the precursor to subsequent instruments such as the [harmonica](#) and the [harmonium](#).

It can be categorized under [lamellophones](#), which is in the category of plucked [idiophones](#). It consists of a metal ring in the shape of a [horseshoe](#) with two parallel forks which form the frame, and a metal tongue in the middle, between the forks, fixed to the ring at one end and free to vibrate at the other.

The Morchang exists, in nearly the same form and design all over the world, and is called by different names (estimated to be around 900) in different languages. For example: Morchang / morsing (India), Kou-Xian ([China](#)), Vargan ([Russia](#)), Munnharpe ([Norway](#)), Zanboorak ([Iran](#)), Maultrommel (Germany), Guimbarde (France), Marranzano (Italy), Doromb (Hungary) and Dambrelis (Lithuania). It is also said that this instrument is prevalent since **Ramayana Period** where this instrument is referred as "**DhanthaVadhyam**"



Kidukitti

Kodukotti is one of the [percussion instruments](#) of [Tamil music](#). It is a type of percussion instrument. References to this are in the [Silappathikaram](#) and [Thevaram](#). Also featured in [Nagasurak](#) concerts. Kitukitti, kitikitti, kirikitti be called different things with this instrument.

It is a musical instrument that combines two instruments. The bottom is narrow and the face is intertwined with the middle of the two.

The instrument is used in poikkalaattam, boom boom cowboys urumiyisai and matukaliyanakkoothu. There is a temple called Kadiliappar in the town of Kizhvelur near Nagapattinam. Kitikitti music was prominent in the worship of this



temple. Due to this, the Kitikitti instrumentalists have been living in this city for generations



Role and importance of these South Indian Instruments during recent years:

Traditionally, **nadaswaram**vidvans hail from families that have passed on the tradition for several generations. For this reason, the number of nadaswaramvidvans is relatively low and restricted to a few places in south India. This situation is changing slowly; there are now a few institutions set up by leading artists and other patrons of the art to train more students and revive this art form.

Are new generations of musicians interested in the nadaswaram? I asked my Classmate M. Rajendran who is asthanavidwan of AdiKesavaPerumal temple, Chennai, India.

He says, he sees a lot of promise in his current students, who absorb and learn with great enthusiasm. “Even at a young age, they can perform well, and it gives me great pleasure and satisfaction to see my students flourish,” he says.

KadriGopalnath, whose father was a nadaswaramvidvan, was considered a prodigy on the nadaswaram before he began adapting the saxophone to play Karnatik music. He is known today as “Saxophone Chakravarthy,” but his legacy begins with the ancient woodwind.

Other than the ancient history of **parai**, its symbolism is acquired from within a modern context. That the parai is only played at the funerals is inaccurate. It is played at other occasions as well — like childbirth and marriages. But caste has



almost always been factored as a reason — and not a mere happenstance — when someone chooses to play the instrument. Now usage of Parai is heard in Gana Albums and social awareness music. During Chennai Sangamam – a Park stage show happened during 2005 during Pongal celebrations, tamil cultural heritage was popularized to people in form of music,dance and theatre. During that Paraiisai was highlighted as it has both music and dance. Paraiisai is taught in corporate offices, housewives and regular office goers as stress buster. This music has a unique tone to make us dance to the beat. It's called Makkalisai- means people music. This article in 27/12/21 Times of India news paper



Makkalisai gets the margazhi stage and you can see the Celebrities like Music director G.V. Prakash, Film Director Pa. Ranjith playing the Parai, the people's instrument.

Morsing Artists are reduced these days as it is not so easy to handle the instrument. Prolong playing may stain and wear down teeth. The musician's smile may become irregular over time, if the position of placing the morsing between the teeth is wrong. Still we find the artists in Katcheri seasons in the Chennai Sabhas.



Conclusion:

Apart from the oral structure, instrumental works are also elements of cultural heritage together with the clothes, jewelry, objects etc. used in folk dances which they accompany, and the instruments used in performing theatrical stories and narratives. Such important cultural heritage is expected to occupy a central and prioritized position in the music education systems of societies.

They help to pass down tradition and culture of people to other and spread good thoughts regarding their **importance**. They help to bring people together and tell people a message of unity and equality.

In this modern world, these instruments are sparingly used and known to people. We the scholars should take a step to make sure to reach the people about these popular south Indian musical instruments and their tones which cannot be matched by the technology sound cards available now. As a saying says “All that glitters are not gold”, the real musical instruments are always precious and to be safeguarded for many centuries.

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