Peter Manuel

Tales, Tunes, and Tassa Drums: Retention and Invention in Indo-Caribbean Music.

Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015. ix–xviii + 268 pp. (Cloth US\$ 60.00)

In this fine book, ethnomusicologist Peter Manuel offers rich documentation and analysis of *tassa* drumming from the Indo-Caribbean. He goes on to compare this tradition with that of the drummers of eastern Uttar Pradesh, in particular the districts surrounding Banaras whence the indentured laborers, ancestors of the *tassa* drummers, hailed. Supported by careful historical and linguistic research, the picture he paints is an affirmation that a people once in exile can maintain their ancestral traditions, and go on to exalt and glorify them. Altogether, *Tales, Tunes, and Tassa Drums* is an uplifting celebration of cultural survival and innovation—brilliance fostered by a community in diaspora. Once the lowest of the low, these East Indians of the Caribbean have now developed remarkable new musical traditions that rival the creole invention of the steel drum. Moreover, Manuel successfully delves into “the general diasporic dynamics that have conditioned musical continuity and change” (p. xv).

The *tassa* in fact refers to a small ensemble of one or two medium-sized kettledrums, traditionally made from a clay shell (now lightweight metal) with a goatskin head (now a synthetic material). It is beaten with two thin sticks (*chōb*), these days made mainly of plastic. The lead drummer is the “cutter” and the following drummer the “*foulay*.” The other member of the ensemble is the bass, an enormously heavy cylindrical drum, hung from the shoulder and across the body. The player strikes one head with a heavy stick, and the other higher-pitched head with his hand. Completing the ensemble are the *jhāl* cymbals, generally imported from India. The *tassa* drums and bass were once hand-crafted from traditional island organic materials; however, these instruments are now mainly made using “machine-shop technology” (p. 154). *Tassa* is traditionally performed on the Muslim holiday of Hosay (Muharram, the first month of the Muslim lunar calendar), at weddings, and in competitions for cash prizes.

Manuel's book is richly illustrated with musical examples, something that we see less and less of these days in ethnomusicological publications. Chapter 5 offers a catalog of the *tassa* composite rhythms (“hands”). Manuel describes, contextualizes, and illustrates the hands *tikora*, *chaubala*, *nagāra*, *steelpan*, *Kabir bhajan*, *kalinda*, *rag bhajan*, *khemta*, *chaiti*, *holi*, *bihāg*, *tillāna*, *mārfat*, *durpat*, *thumri*, *madrasī*, and so on and so on.

In addition to the *tassa* tradition, Manuel presents ethnographic and musical analysis of various other men's genres including *birha*, *chowtal*, the Tulsidas *Mānas* singing, and the epic tradition of *ālāhā*, which apparently was known

in Trinidad up to the 1990s. He explores the “enigmatic *dantāl*,” described as “the Ur-trio also comprising the harmonium and the *dholak*.” The *dantāl* is a long iron rod sometimes fashioned from automotive brake spring material. It is struck with a small U-shaped beater (*tāli*). East Indian *dantāl* artists vigorously maintain that this instrument was invented in Trinidad, claiming that it is comparable to the invention on the island of the Afro-Trinidadian steel drum. Here a competition of the two main ethnic groups in Trinidad is revealed. There is, however, evidence that the origin dates back to the nineteenth century in Bhojpuri-speaking regions of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Although no longer played in India, several Indian experts described such an instrument to Manuel. The *dantāl* is ubiquitous in Fiji, where Indian indentured laborers were sent from 1879 to 1916. However, local Trinidadian experts argue emphatically that this “diasporic icon” derived initially from the Caribbean.

Credit goes to Manuel and to editors at the University of Illinois Press for a well-edited volume with a very pleasing design. Of course, one wishes that it had been possible to include a CD, but the age of the CD has passed, and also this practice seems these days to be beyond the budget of the typical university press.

Tales, Tunes, and Tassa Drums is a welcome addition to the literature on the Indo-Caribbean. I believe that tassa players will be surprised and fascinated to see their hopes and dreams rendered in such careful research. It is also a delight to this reviewer, who first conducted ethnomusicological fieldwork in Trinidad in 1974, that the rich East Indian culture to be found there—developing and changing and blooming with each passing year—has so caught the imagination of many ethnomusicologists. There is no reason to doubt that the next decades will see more dazzling developments in Indo-Caribbean musical culture and throughout the Indian diaspora. I encourage our newest generation of ethnomusicologists to explore the musical cultures of Trinidad, Suriname, Guyana, Fiji, and—not the least—the paradise that is Mauritius. There are many more tales to be told. And moreover, these are the sugar islands, these are the rum islands, with enchanting tropical breezes and white sand beaches. So venture forth!

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