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FROM DHOL-TASHA TO TASSA:
TRADITION AND TRANSFORMATION
IN INDIAN TRINIDADIAN TASSA DRUMMING

In the 1830s, as emancipation in the British Empire drew inevitably closer, planters in Britain's plantation colonies sought an alternative to chattel slavery. After experimenting with contracted workers from various parts of the world, planters eventually settled on India as a source of cheap, available labor. Thus, from 1834 until 1917, millions of Indians, mostly from present-day Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, were carried to far-flung British territories from Oceania to Belize. Some were also transported to French, Spanish, and Dutch colonies, mostly in the Circum-Caribbean. Indians brought with them language, religious practices, family structures, foodways and creative expression, including music. This essay centers on one such musical practice, dhol-tasha, a style of North Indian folk drumming spread globally by the indenture system. I focus specifically on tassa, the dhol-tasha variant popular in Trinidad and Tobago. While maintaining obvious and measurable links with its Indian forebears, tassa has undergone significant transformations in instrument construction, repertoire and performance practice. I conclude by arguing that such innovations suggest tassa is not a mere artifact of cultural survival, but a dynamic art form grounded in a distinct Indian aesthetic yet also thoroughly Caribbean in its diasporic creativity.

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DHOL-TASHA IN THE INDIAN INDENTURE DIASPORA

The Trinidadian tassa drum is a single-headed membranophone with a bowl-shaped shell, usually hung from the neck by a strip of cloth (though sometimes strapped around the waist) and played with two thin and very flexible sticks called chopos. Tassa is played in a percussion ensemble of four players including at least two tassa drummers, at least one low-pitched double-headed membranophone called bass, and at least one player of small hand cymbals called jhal. While tassa repertoire is drawn from an eclectic variety of Indian, Caribbean, and other source material, the most direct antecedent of tassa is North Indian dhol-tasha whose contemporary performance in India and Pakistan features ensembles of various sizes comprising small kettledrums called tasha, double-headed barrel drums called dhol, and a variety of metal time-keeping instruments. The word “tasha” is thought to derive from the Arabic *tāsat* meaning “bowl,” which itself is the likely source of European-language cognates including the French *tasse*, Italian *tazza*, Spanish *taza*, and Portuguese *taça*, each meaning “cup” or “bowl” (Manuel, *Tales, Tunes, and Tassa Drums* 136–37). The word was also borrowed into Persian where it became associated with a type of shallow kettledrum as depicted in the Tâq-i-Bustân reliefs in western Iran dating to around 600 CE (Wolf, *Embodiment and Ambivalence* 87). While some suggest that this drum spread throughout the region into India (and as far as Indonesia) along with the rise of the Mughal Empire, it is perhaps just as likely that the term “tasha” was used to refer to instruments of this archetype extant on the subcontinent. Indeed, techniques for covering a bowl-shaped shell with animal skin are rather intuitive and found the world over. Whatever the case, a particularly dynamic dhol-tasha drumming tradition had been well established in India by at least 1800 (though probably much earlier). In this period, dhol-tasha enjoyed enthusiastic support in and around Lucknow where it was an especially indispensable accompaniment for Shi’a Muslim Muharram observances.

Though rooted in Shi’a tradition, many Sunnis and Hindus also came to participate in Muharram activities alongside their Shi’a compatriots (Aziz 157; Vahed 110–11). While some observed all aspects of the ritual – fasting, building and parading tazias,¹ drumming, etc. – others participated passively, appreciating the spectacle and communal nature of the event. While the core Shi’a tradition-bearers kept more esoteric rituals in private, the public face of the Muharram observance took on a carnivalesque atmosphere complete with food vendors, wrestling competitions, and alcohol consumption. In this way, most participants

¹ Replicas of the tomb of Imam Hussein.

perhaps broadly perceived Muharram as a festive occasion the religious symbolism of which was little understood. Dhol-tasha's links with Muharram therefore did not mark the ensemble as somehow specific to Islam. Quite to the contrary, dhol-tasha bands played for a variety of Hindu religious events, especially Hindu weddings (just as they do in India today) where a different set of repertoire signaled celebration rather than lamentation; it is also rather likely that a significant number of drummers were themselves Hindu (Wolf, "Music" 283; Sharar 207). In this way, dhol-tasha had attained an important place in North Indian musical culture by the time laborers began emigrating from the region in the 1830s, therefore ensuring that dhol-tasha travelled with indentured Indians across the globe where they reconstituted and reinvented this musical tradition to varying degrees of complexity and hybridization.



Figure 1. A Muharram procession in Port Louis, Mauritius featuring dhol-tasha drumming from members of Ghoon No. 5. September 2019. Photo by the author

The Muharram observance in Sumatra, locally termed *Tabut*, features a well-developed "dol-tasa" performance practice with bands featuring a single *tasa* leading a larger number of *dols*.² In Mauritius, dhol-tasha is also played exclusively for the Muharram observance, locally termed *Ghoon* (Figure 1). Punjabi-style dhol

² *Dol-tasa* in Sumatra actually predates the indentureship system. Locals trace the importation of dhol-tasha to the late 1700s coinciding with the arrival of Indian *sepoys* recruited by the British East India Company to man its fort in Bengkulu (Kartomi 78-81).

drumming is preferred for Hindu weddings (this perhaps influenced by the popularity of such in imported Indian films and television) while other Indian-Mauritian wedding traditions, including geet gawai (the compendium of folk songs sung throughout multiple days of Hindu wedding rituals), continue to closely parallel their Bhojpuri counterparts in India (Boodhoo; “National Inventory”).

The Muharram context has faded in importance in Fiji and Suriname where local dhol-tasha variants are linked with Hindu weddings and other life cycle events. Fijian drumming is rather limited in repertoire and technique, yet Surinamese tassa drummers have in recent decades incorporated both instruments-marching bass drums, quads, snare drums, trumpets, trombones, etc. – and repertoire from the local African Surinamese brass bands, enlivening what was by most accounts a rather stagnant tradition. Ostentatious observations of Muharram in Guyana and Jamaica have also vanished, though tassa drumming in these locales has an enthusiastic following attached to Hindu celebrations and Indian cultural events in general. However, the vitality of Guyanese and Jamaican tassa performance practice is largely thanks to the influence of Trinidadian tassa, shared by way of social media and musical exchanges in the secondary Indian Caribbean diaspora in Florida, New York and Toronto.



Figure 2. The tassa band Trinidad & Tobago Sweet Tassa founded and directed by Lenny Kumar (left) performing at a wedding. March 2016. Photo by the author

TRINIDADIAN TASSA REPERTOIRE
AND ENSEMBLE HIERARCHY

Of all dhol-tasha variants outside of India, perhaps the most vibrant is tassa drumming in Trinidad and Tobago where musicians have developed a high level of professionalization with expectations of virtuosity and precision, mutually reinforcing refinements in instrument construction and repertoire. Despite tassa's divergence from Indian forebears, it remains an essential accompaniment for the Muharram observance, locally termed Hosay; for portions of the three-day set of Hindu wedding rituals; and for all manner of cultural and national celebrations. As discussed later, formal tassa competitions have also emerged as an important performance context since the 1980s.

The term "tassa" refers both to the bowl-shaped drum called tassa and to the ensemble within which it plays a central role. There are four instruments in a typical tassa ensemble, corresponding to the four musical parts characteristic of all tassa repertoire: one lead tassa player called the cutter, one accompanying tassa called the foulé, one large double-headed bass drum, and one set of hand cymbals called jhal. Only one player on each part is required, though bands may include more according to their preference. While most performance contexts typically require no more than the minimum complement of four players covering the four instrumental parts, ensembles might include fifty or more players for Hosay with only one tassa occupying the cutter role at any given moment while numerous players may take up the foulé, bass, or jhal. In all cases, the rhythmic patterns of the latter together form a composite ostinato while the cutter leads the ensemble, improvising creative rhythmic passages while also playing taals (specific rhythmic patterns akin to "breaks" in West African djembe repertoire, for example) meant to signal the band to start, stop, or move between sections of music. Standard tassa repertoire is quite limited with average drummers knowledgeable of perhaps ten "hands" (distinct composite rhythms) while veteran drummers may claim to know fifty or more. Hands are divided into two broad categories, those for Hosay and those for all other occasions. Hosay hands are few and meant to recall portions of the narrative of Imam Hussein's martyrdom at the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE. In this regard the music creatively represents sounds of war, battle, and mourning. As such, Hosay hands comprise the only compendium of sacred music in tassa repertoire. While tassa is often played for Hindu religious events, the music in this context is not considered particularly sacred in any way.

Non-Hosay hands are drawn from an eclectic variety of sources. Tassa has become a generic Indian percussion ensemble of sorts, displacing and absorbing

repertoire of other Indian drums as their performance has disappeared in the Indian Trinidadian community. Common hands, for example, include nagara and tikora, each named for and outlining characteristic rhythms of North Indian drums by the same names (Ballengee 105, 115). As *tassa* developed in diaspora, it also borrowed from other Indian Caribbean genres, especially local folk and semi-classical song traditions. Examples in this regard include the hands *chaubola* (named for a particular poetic form used for local *tān* singing) and *dingolay*, which has a Creole name (meaning “to dance wildly”) yet bears close rhythmic affinity with typical *dholak* drumming patterns used to accompany a variety of devotional and folk genres. *Tassa* repertoire has also adapted African Trinidadian musical style to a certain degree. The clearest example is the *tassa* hand *calypso* whose rhythms are distilled from those typically played by the Trinidadian steel orchestra, an important accompaniment for African Trinidadian *calypso* singing beginning in the 1930s. However, such adaptations importantly include the imposition of *taals* and other devices to make the adaptation fit the standards of *tassa* form and an overall Indian-derived musical aesthetic.

Some degree of African Trinidadian influence is also seen in the adoption of the terms “*cutter*” and “*foulé*” that are mapped onto *tassa* from African Trinidadian drumming ensembles where they refer to the lead and supporting drums, respectively (Stuempfle 23-24; Ballengee 87-93). The word “*cutter*” may be an Anglicization of *kata*, a Ki-Kongo word meaning “to cut” (Averill 217n) that commonly appears in African Caribbean drum nomenclature (e.g. Cuban *cata* and Guadeloupean *gwo ka[ta]*), while *foulé* may derive from the French *refouler*, connoting in this sense a response to the lead drum (McDaniel 88). It would be incorrect to conclude that African Trinidadian musical style profoundly influenced *tassa* drumming. Yet it is not far-fetched to suggest that with borrowed nomenclature came ideas about ensemble hierarchy that reinforced the stratified parts of the *tassa* ensemble, an element clearly evident in African Trinidadian drumming but less so in Indian *dhol-tasha* wherein improvisation by the lead drummer is limited and the *foulé* role is more loosely defined than in Trinidadian *tassa*. In African Trinidadian *kalenda* drumming, for example, *tassa* musicians perhaps found an intriguing corollary to their own music and therefore adopted the terms *cutter* and *foulé* as these roles became distinct and standardized within the *tassa* ensemble.

TRADITION AND REFINEMENT IN MUSICAL INSTRUMENT CONSTRUCTION

Current tassa performance practice relies on a set of instruments whose present form has been refined over successive generations, though with significant and rapid transformation beginning in the last part of the 20th century. The remainder of this article centers on changes in instrument construction and corollary changes in repertoire and performance practice that continue to catalyze and mutually reinforce one another.

The earliest tassas in Trinidad were likely similar to the flat, clay-shelled tashas of North India. By the 1950s, however, drummers had decidedly shifted to much bigger drum shells fashioned from large clay pots covered with goatskin. Most drummers call this a “clay tassa” or “goatskin tassa.” The construction process of a clay-and-goatskin tassa is not complicated yet requires specialized knowledge in preparing the skin and making the clay shell. Today, relatively few potters continue to manufacture tassa shells. The late Mahadeo Goolcharan, who I visited in 2011, was still making tassa shells, though he admitted that demand was only a fraction of what it had been in times past. The profession of making pottery ran in his family. Goolcharan told me, “My grandparents came from India... and from there it was handed down to my parents, and [then] to me, and now my son.” Despite such tradition, Goolcharan’s work was not without innovation. The centerpiece of his workshop was a potter’s wheel powered by an automobile transmission system. Modified to run on electric power, Mahadeo used the gear lever to manage the speed of the wheel, which was propelled by the drive shaft. Clay-and-goatskin tassa drums are heavy and take lots of care to maintain. Moreover, to play at the proper pitch, the goatskin drumhead needs to be heated by a fire about every twenty minutes, a technique common among dhol-tasha traditions throughout the global diaspora (for example, Kartomi 82).

By the 1990s, significant changes in instrument construction and ideas about performance practice came to greatly impact Trinidadian tassa. An Indian Trinidadian cultural renaissance gathered steam throughout the 1970s and 1980s inspired by and in counterpoint to the global Black Power Movement. In response, numerous initiatives sprang up within the Indian Trinidadian community aimed to foster preservation, development, and promotion of Indian culture. This period saw the expansion of academic research, including seminal conferences and publications on the motivations, mechanics, and legacy of Indian indenturedship and the efflorescence of Indian culture in the post-indenture period (La Guerre, Dabydeen and Samaroo). A growing sense of ethnic pride was also

nurtured and reflected in the greater visibility of Indian Trinidadian creative expression. For example, two immensely popular televised Indian talent competitions – *Mastana Bahar* and *The Indian Cultural Pageant* – premiered in the 1970s, exposing audiences to the diversity of Indian Trinidadian performing arts in an accessible way, providing even non-Indian audiences an easy portal for appreciating Indian Trinidadian music and dance (Niranjana 178). Also as part of this renaissance, the first formally adjudicated *tassa* competition was staged in 1984, spawning numerous imitators all of which incentivized well-rehearsed, stage-worthy renditions of *tassa* repertoire. The effect was that *tassa* was elevated from a simple village music to a style worthy of critique. These formal competitions, which continue to be highly anticipated events within the *tassa* community, in turn shaped performance practice in important ways. Preferences shifted toward faster tempos, more complex rhythms, and virtuosic improvisation which mutually reinforced a number of revolutionary transformations in musical instrument construction (Ballengee 189-190). In short, instruments became more refined and robust largely to meet the demands of a transitional repertoire and vice versa, all of which was encouraged and rewarded through the expectations of formal competition. Meanwhile, competition-style repertoire and performance practice fed back into everyday performances, leading to increasing professionalization of *tassa* bands.

Tassa

While drummers have always experimented with a variety of raw materials to make *tassa* drums, by the 1990s pressurized freon tanks became the most common material for making *tassa* shells. In this process, the top is cut away from the tank to leave a lightweight yet durable steel bowl-shaped shell that conveniently accepts a commercial-produced synthetic drumhead, usually thirteen or fourteen inches in diameter (Figure 3). The head is affixed by a “nut-and-bolt” mechanism consisting of a counterhoop fashioned from a steel rod, bent and welded into a ring, with standard ¼-inch bolts evenly spaced around the hoop and welded perpendicularly. As the counterhoop is placed upon the flange of the drumhead, these bolts slide into receiving brackets welded to the shell and are then secured with nuts and washers. This archetype is commonly referred to as a “nut-and-bolt” or “plastic” *tassa* (the latter referring to the material of the drumhead). With good welds, this allows for a tremendous amount of pressure on the drumhead, in turn providing sustained tuning at higher pitches, unlike the clay-and-goatskin *tassa* which requires heating to raise the pitch to a proper level for performance.



Figure 3. Lenny Kumar playing a nut-and-bolt tassa drum with fiberglass chopsticks.
April 2011. Photo by Federico Moratorio

Though there are competing stories about the origin of the nut-and-bolt tassa, the late Krishna Soogrim-Ram of Malick Tassa Drummers claimed to be its inventor when I first talked to him in 2007. He was a talented player of dholak and tassa much in demand from a young age. Throughout the 1980s and beyond, Soogrim-Ram and Malick Tassa Drummers were frequently called upon for high profile events and musical collaborations where tassa was meant to represent Indian Trinidadian culture. For example, Malick Tassa Drummers performed with the Trinidad All Stars Steel Orchestra for their arrangement of the calypso “Curry Tabanca” in 1987, perhaps the first such successful fusion of steel pan and tassa on the Panorama stage.³ Malick Tassa Drummers also were integral to the 2009

³ Panorama is Trinidad and Tobago’s national steel orchestra competition, held annually during the Carnival season. As steel pan is the country’s national instrument, the Panorama final round is a highly anticipated event and receives a great amount of attention from the press. Malick Tassa

performance of an arrangement of Handel's *Messiah* staged by the Lydian Singers, an amateur choir founded and at the time directed by Trinidadian cultural icon Pat Bishop.⁴

Soogrim-Ram was motivated to find a suitable method for attaching a synthetic drumhead onto the tassa for two principal reasons. First, the radiant heat from the hot shell of the clay-and-goatskin drum aggravated his rheumatoid arthritis. Second, and most importantly, Soogrim-Ram wanted to create a tassa drum that could be played both indoors and in colder climates. On numerous occasions visiting relatives in New York City, Soogrim-Ram would be asked to play for family and community functions. In the cold weather, he was frustrated with the rate at which his drum cooled and therefore dropped in pitch. He was equally frustrated when performing for events held in air-conditioned buildings in Port of Spain. Therefore, the idea of using a synthetic drumhead was a somewhat natural conclusion for him. Indeed, Soogrim-Ram had access to numerous examples – like orchestral drums, Latin percussion instruments, and some imported Indian drums – that used similar tensioning systems. In this way, Soogrim-Ram's innovation was not in “inventing” a new system for making a drum. Rather, it was in applying such technology to tassa, first putting a plastic drumhead on a carved teakwood tassa shell. His cousin, Vijay Rambir, was the first to come upon the idea of using freon tanks in concert with the nut-and-bolt mechanism.

While Soogrim-Ram's innovation was at first met with derision by some veteran drummers, the nut-and-bolt tassa's convenience was clear. Virtually all drummers, both at home and in the Caribbean diaspora in North America, had adopted the design by the late 1990s. The utility of the nut-and-bolt drum is obvious: while clay drums are heavy and fragile, metal drums are light, easy to maintain, and eliminate the need to heat the drumhead to raise the pitch. Moreover, making clay pots and preparing goatskin is not easy and takes a lot of time and effort. But many have easy access to the rudimentary skills to create and personalize their own nut-and-bolt drum.

In the midst of the nut-and-bolt tassa revolution, many drummers also began turning to synthetic materials to make their drumsticks, or chopos. Traditionally, chopos were made from flexible strips of cane with balls of natural rubber on the tip. Proper performance technique requires the shaft of the chope to strike the rim

Drummers' appearance with the Trinidad All Stars Steel Orchestra was therefore an important moment showcasing musical fusion as a metaphor for cultural fusion.

⁴ When Bishop died in 2011, Soogrim-Ram and Malick Tassa Drummers performed at her funeral, a favor that the Lydian Singers returned with a performance of their own at the funeral of Soogrim-Ram in 2012.

of the drum and the tip to bounce off the center of the drumhead. Because of this, chopes should be strong but also very flexible to withstand such punishing blows. Drummers discovered that their traditional chopes wore out more quickly when playing nut-and-bolt tassas. The cane would shred after repeated impacts on the metal hoop and the occasional accidental blow to one of the bolts. Moreover, the somewhat sticky rubber tip was not well suited for striking on the plastic drumhead. As such, drummers began fashioning chopes from fiberglass strips or rods which proved much more durable and became standard equipment for all tassa drummers. In place of rubber, the tips are made from densely packed balls of masking tape while handles are made from fabric wrapped around the fiberglass and held in place by strips of sticky tape. In terms of performance practice, fiberglass chopes allow for greater precision at faster tempos.

Jhal

Largely in response to expectations of faster tempos and greater rhythmic precision, the brass hand cymbals known as *jhal* also underwent significant structural changes beginning in the 1960s, arriving at its present form in the 1980s or soon thereafter. In the past, the *jhal* was often made from relatively thin sheets of brass with a diameter as much as twelve inches. At this size and weight, the instrument is rather unwieldy and decidedly noisy.⁵ *Jhal* of today, however, are rarely larger than about six inches in diameter and cut from thick brass sheets. In the *jhal*'s present form, it is much more ergonomic and produces a cleaner, higher-pitched sound compared to *jhal* of the past. I posit that this change came alongside gradual changes in performance practice that trended toward greater precision and faster tempos which could only be achieved with a more capable instrument.

Bass

The bass drum of the tassa ensemble remained relatively untouched throughout these transformations until very recently. In times past, the bass was commonly an oblong stave drum resembling a large wooden cask. As such, this old-style drum is sometimes referred to as a "rum barrel" bass. However, since at least the 1960s, drummers have made bass drums in strictly cylindrical shapes carved from solid logs of mango, cedar, or a similar wood. Some drum builders have experimented with other materials including steel oil barrels and industrial

⁵ As an example of the noisiness of *jhal* in times past, see Emory Cook's recordings of tassa in 1956 contained on the LP *East Indian Drums of Tunapuna* (Cook Records, COOK05018).

plastic barrels, both by-products of the Trinidad and Tobago's petrochemical industry. Krishna Soogrim-Ram even built a bass shell from fiberglass resin resulting in a very lightweight and durable instrument. However, none of these experiments have surpassed the current preference for solid wood drum shells.

No matter the material used to build the drum shell, the heads of the bass are made from goat skin (or sometimes deer or calf) and affixed with lacing comprising a single length of rope running back and forth from one head to the other. To prepare a head for mounting, the skin is stretched, cleaned, dried, and shaved. It is then moistened enough to be pliable and crimped between two metal rings slightly larger in diameter than the shell to create a crimped edge that will not pull out when stretched on the drum. After both drumheads are finished in this way, they are temporarily attached to the drum so that the moistened heads take the shape of the shell.

After they are dry, the drumheads are removed and a glutinous mixture called masala is applied in a tight circular layer to the center of the underside of each head.⁶ If the masala is applied too thin, overtones muddy the fundamental, but if the masala is too thick, the instrument lacks resonance. Differing amounts of masala also aid in tuning the drumheads, one being relatively lower-pitched than the other. The heads are finally affixed to the shell using rope lacing, with fine tuning done by pulling or relaxing metal rings threaded onto the rope. In performance, the bass is strung around the player's neck with a strip of cloth positioned so that the lower pitched side (played with a stick) drops lower than the higher pitched side (played with the other bare hand).

RECOVERING THE SWEETNESS OF GOATSKIN

The popularity of the nut-and-bolt tassa drum has led to the virtual obsolescence of traditional goatskin drums. Many veteran drummers lament this change, and often suggest that the goatskin tassa objectively sounds better. "It's a big change," said Mahadeo Goolcharan when I asked him about the transition to nut-and-bolt tassas. "It's more for convenience, not for sound," he continued. Goolcharan's position reflects the views of many drummers that I have met over the years. To my ears, the sound of the nut-and-bolt tassa is indeed harsher than

⁶ This culinary metaphor rightly evokes a pasty mixture of various recipes. In Trinidad, tar is often used as a base for masala to which may be added paraffin wax, castor oil, or other ingredients by preference of the builder, with specific recipes jealously guarded from public knowledge. This technique is common for a wide variety of South Asian drums.

a traditional goatskin drum. And drummers of all ages often say that goatskin drums sound “sweeter” thanks to a timbre that naturally accentuates mid-range frequencies while maintaining the kind of high-end attack that is characteristic of tassa performance. On a nut-and-bolt drum, much of the subtle sonic coloration typical of goatskin drumheads is absent. Despite ubiquitous claims of the goatskin tassa’s superiority, in practice virtually all drummers regularly perform using nut-and-bolt drums. All while a new generation of drummers has cultivated an aesthetic taste for increasingly higher-pitched tunings and ear-splitting volume that could only be achieved through the innovations afforded by the nut-and-bolt tassa. Such is the conundrum: while drummers nostalgically pine for the sound of a goatskin drum, few are willing to give up the convenience and robustness of the nut-and-bolt tassa.

With this in mind, many drummers have set out to find a balance between tradition and innovation through experimenting with various combinations of materials that have the potential to achieve the sweetness of goatskin while maintaining the convenience of the nut-and-bolt drum. Some drummers, for example, began fashioning plastic shells from commercial fishing buoys, slicing them in half and attaching a synthetic drumhead with a nut-and-bolt mechanism. Lenny Kumar improved upon this design by replacing the nut-and-bolt system with nylon rope lacing that he learned from examining West African djembe drums. In comparison to a nut-and-bolt drum, rope lacing allows for a more even tension around the drumhead, eliminating unwanted frequencies and creating a more focused sound that, according to some, better approximates the sound of a goatskin tassa. Satya Maraj, a drummer in New York City, created a hybrid of the two archetypes by adding a nut-and-bolt mechanism to a clay shell. As a young teenager, he designed and built a metal harness to fit on the underside of the clay shell that attaches to a counterhoop with the customary nut-and-bolt system. In this way, a synthetic head can be fitted onto the clay drum shell. However, the most successful experiment with alternative materials in my view is Krishna Soogrim-Ram’s tassas built from carved teakwood shells that use a nut-and-bolt system to attach synthetic drumheads. Although these drums do not precisely approximate the timbre of a goatskin drum, they nonetheless produce a subjectively sweeter sound with reduced overtones and absence of the metallic resonant character of the metal-shelled nut-and-bolt tassa.

CONCLUSIONS

There are clearly continuities from Indian dhol-tasha to Trinidadian tassa. First and foremost is the basic structure and function of the ensemble itself. The fundamental conglomeration of tasha, dhol, and jhal persists in Trinidad as do the primary performance contexts of Muharram and Hindu weddings, both of which are celebrations that involve processions and call for a certain regality. The martial character of dhol-tasha as an essential component of the Muharram remembrance of battle and martyrdom carries over, for example, in the drumming used to welcome the groom's entourage at a Trinidadian Hindu wedding. Indeed, given its persistent association with Indian Trinidadian cultural and religious contexts, Trinidadians from all walks of life readily identify tassa as an "Indian thing."

Yet, closer inspection reveals tremendous transformations that reflect the creolizing forces at play in diaspora. Even if there is no significant or obvious African Trinidadian influence on tassa repertoire or performance practice, tassa has – like other Indian Trinidadian music (Ramnarine; Manuel *Tān-Singing and Tales, Tunes, and Tassa Drums*) – developed along a distinctly diasporic trajectory in dialogue with but divergent from Indian forebears. This is especially evident in the transformations in musical instrument construction I have described in this essay. As performance contexts were adapted according to diasporic tastes, the function of the repertoire adapted alongside, which in turn catalyzed the advent of the nut-and-bolt tassa, the advent of fiberglass chopos, the miniaturization of the jhal, and the bass's transition to using a solid wood cylindrical shell. While adapting to and influencing changes in repertoire and performance practice, these transformations have made building and maintaining instruments more convenient which has importantly worked to democratize access to tassa performance. While veteran drummers pine for days of old when clay-and-goatskin drums were the norm, one must only look to the massive proliferation of tassa bands since the 1990s to understand the impact these innovations have had on access to tassa performance. While a handful of established bands tend to dominate formal competitions, there are perhaps a hundred or more organized tassa bands in Trinidad and Tobago today, with many more ad hoc bands that come and go over time. When compared with other diasporic dhol-tasha traditions that have largely fallen to the wayside, Trinidadian tassa's popularity has never waned and indeed has increased over time, which can scarcely be said for many other traditional music styles around the world. In the end, tassa is not a mere cultural survival. Rather, it has developed into a dynamic art form, one rooted in a distinctly North Indian folk aesthetic yet also thoroughly Caribbean in its diasporic creativity.

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FROM DHOL-TASHA TO TASSA:
TRADITION AND TRANSFORMATION
IN INDIAN TRINIDADIAN TASSA DRUMMING

S u m m a r y

The North Indian dhol-tasha drumming tradition was spread globally by the British indenture-ship system, which began in the 1830s and sent millions of men, women, and children to work in agricultural and industrial colonies around the world. While distinct dhol-tasha variants emerged in many places where indentured laborers settled, the most vibrant of these is tassa drumming in the southern Caribbean country of Trinidad and Tobago. While maintaining obvious and measurable links with its Indian forebears, tassa has undergone significant transformations in instrument construction, repertoire and performance practice. The essay concludes by arguing that such innovations suggest tassa is not a mere example of cultural survival, but a dynamic art form grounded in a distinct Indian aesthetic yet also thoroughly Caribbean in its diasporic creativity.

Keywords: South Asia; Caribbean; indentureship; diaspora; traditional music.

OD DHOL-TASHA DO TASSA:
TRADYCJA I TRANSFORMACJA
W INDYJSKIM TRYNIDADZKIM BĘBNIE TASSA

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Północno-indyjska tradycja gry na bębnach dhol-tasha została rozpowszechniona na całym świecie dzięki brytyjskiemu systemowi umów, który rozpoczął się w latach 30. XIX wieku, kiedy to miliony mężczyzn, kobiet i dzieci zostały wysłane do pracy w rolniczych i przemysłowych koloniach na całym świecie. W wielu miejscach, w których osiedlili się robotnicy kontraktowi, pojawiły się odrębne warianty dhol-tasha. Najbardziej żywym z nich jest bęben tassa w południowo-karaibskim Trynidadzie i Tobago. Utrzymując oczywiste i wymierne związki z indyjskimi przodkami, bęben tassa przeszedł znaczące przemiany w konstrukcji instrumentów, repertuarze i praktyce wykonawczej. Takie innowacje sugerują, że tassa nie jest zwykłym przykładem formą kulturowego przetrwania, ale dynamiczną formą sztuki, opartą na odrębnej indyjskiej estetyce, a jednocześnie całkowicie karaibskiej w swojej diasporycznej kreatywności.

Słowa kluczowe: Azja Południowa; Karaiby; praca kontraktowa; diaspora; muzyka tradycyjna.