



# Smithsonian Folkways

## **Music in South India – Kerala A Smithsonian Folkways Lesson**

Designed by: Lum Chee Hoo  
University of Washington

### **Summary:**

Talk about the geography, language, and culture of Kerala in South India using story songs, dance dramas, and rhythms. Introduce students to specific artists and instruments important to Kerala's musical traditions.

### **Suggested Grade Levels:** 9-12

**Country:** India

**Region:** Asia

**Culture Group:** Kerala

**Genre:** Indian

**Instruments:** Voice

**Language:** Malayalam

**Co-Curricular Areas:** Social Studies

**National Standards:** 6, 9

**Prerequisites:** None

### **Objectives:**

- Learn about culture of Kerala group, including music, dance, and language

### **Materials:**

- “Idakka” from Music from South India- Kerala (FWO4365)  
<http://www.folkways.si.edu/tr-ankaran-nambudiri-and-pm-narayana-mara/idakka/world/music/track/smithsonian>
- “Nala Charitam,” Music from South India- Kerala (FWO4365)  
<http://www.folkways.si.edu/mep-pillai-and-gopinathan-nayar-k-damodaran-pannikar-and-vasudeva-poduwal-mankulam-vishnu-nambudiri-and-kudama-ur-karunakaran-nayar/kathakai-nala-charitam/world/music/track/smithsonian>
- “Panchawadyam” from Music from South India- Kerala (FWO4365)  
<http://www.folkways.si.edu/instrumental/panchawadyam/world/music/track/smithsonian>  
<http://www.folkways.si.edu/narayana-mara-and-party/panchawadyam/world/music/track/smithsonian>
- Liner notes from Music from South India- Kerala (FWO4365)  
[http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/liner\\_notes/folkways/FWO4365.pdf](http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/liner_notes/folkways/FWO4365.pdf)

- The JVC video anthology of world music and dance: South Asia I, India, Track 11-2 (Kathakali-dance-drama: Dryodana vadham from the Mohabharata)
- DVD - Vanaprastham: The last dance (1999). Director: Shaji N. Karun. Vanguard Cinema. ASIN: B000066C7A
- Map of South India
- Pictures of instruments: from liner notes and *Music in South India: Experiencing music, expressing culture*

### Lesson Segments:

1. **Video** (National Standards 9)
2. **“Nala Charitam”** (National Standards 6, 9)
3. **Percussion** (National Standards 9)

#### 1. Video

- a. Before showing the video segment, ask pupils to note down:
  - i. Where they think the music drama is from
  - ii. What language is being sung
  - iii. What instruments accompany the music drama
  - iv. Who are singing (actors?)
  - v. What type (genre) of story is being told
  - vi. What was interesting about the music drama
- b. Elicit responses from pupils.
- c. See map of South India.
  - i. Locate Kerala (talk about its geographical, social, historical-context)
- d. Talk about the main languages spoken in South India (highlighting the language spoken in the Kathakali dance drama (Malayalam)).
- e. Talk about the singers (Ponnani & Sinkidi), instruments (Chenda, Maddalam, Chengalam, Illatalam), and the dancers (character types, costume, makeup) in the dance drama. (Information can be obtained from Liner notes, Music from South India-Kerala (p.6-8) and Viswanathan & Allen, 2004, p.105-108).

**Assessment:** Can the pupils speak about the music and culture of South India?

#### 2. “Nala Charitam” (The Story of Prince Nala)

- a. Relate the scene to students (from liner notes of Music from South India, Kerala p.8).
- b. Listen to recording.
- c. Clap the beat and determine the Tala (metrical cycle) – cempata (Eight-beat cycle).

- d. Listen to recording again and this time, chant the solkattu (Vocalized syllables) along with kriya (hand gestures).

Solkattu – ta ka di mi ta ka jo nu  
Kriya – C pinky pointer thumb C W C W  
(C- clap with palm down, W- wave, ‘pinky’, ‘pointer’, ‘thumb’ – finger counts)

[depending on prior knowledge of pupils, the teacher might have to go through basic Karnatak tala, solkattu and kriya before proceeding with the abovementioned activity]

**Assessment:** Can pupils chant to the pulse of the tune?

### 3. Percussion

- a. As percussion instruments and drumming is a distinct feature of the Kerala soundscape (Viswanathan & Allen, 2004), some of the common percussion instruments should be highlighted, referring to their use in religious rituals and in dance drama.
- b. “Idakka”
- Listen to recording
  - Compare the “Idakka” to the West African talking drums (see picture of the Idakka (Viswanathan & Allen, 2004, p.104)
- c. “Padchawadyam”
- Listen to recording
  - Clap with the Illatalam
  - On repeated listening, draw a listening chart for the Illatalam and the Kombu (See pictures of the instruments – from liner notes of Music from South India-Kerala, p.3)

#### Extension:

- Video: Vanaprastham: The last dance
- Select segments to show
  - Chenda and other percussion instruments accompanying Kathakali
  - Kathakali training
  - Kathakali performances
  - Relationship between singer and dance

**Assessment:** Can the pupils compare the two types of drumming? Can they tell the significance of drumming in Indian culture?

#### Reference

Viswanathan, T. & Allen, M. H. (2004). Music in South India: experiencing music, expressing culture. New York: Oxford University Press