



CHRISTIAN
MUSICOLOGICAL
SOCIETY OF INDIA

Garland Encyclopedia of World Music
Kerala Jewish Music

Garland Encyclopedia of World Music

Kerala Jewish Music

JEWISH MUSIC

The first Jewish settlement in Kerala is said to have taken place after the destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70. There were several migrations of Jews to Kerala from the Middle East and Europe in the 4th, 5th, and 15th centuries. After 1948, many Kerala Jews migrated to Israel. At present (1996), there are only seventy-seven Jews in Kerala. They belong to two different endogamous communities known as Sepharadim and Askenadim. Both communities gather for prayer at the only functioning synagogue now at Mattanchery, in Kochi (Cochin). They share the same musical traditions with minor variations.

Based on the language of the text, the Jewish music repertory may be divided into two categories: Hebrew or Aramaic songs and chants; and Malayalam songs. Hebrew songs --cantillation of the Bible, prayer, and semi-religious songs-- are sung both by men and women in the synagogue and during ceremonies at home. There are songs that are simple and strictly metrical, and those governed by syllabic-poetic rhythm and meter. Intercultural influences can be seen in these songs and chants. Traces of Yemenite and Babylonian styles in the cantillation of the Bible is an indication of early contacts of Kerala Jews with Yemenite and Babylonian Jews. The Syrian Christians of Kerala and Jews share many similar rituals and customs, and their liturgical music, too, show mutual influences. The Jews in Kerala do not play musical instruments for accompaniment or for entertainment. However, during wedding celebrations, Hindu and Muslim instrumental ensembles used to be invited to perform in front of the houses of the bride and the groom.

There are three kinds of Malayalam songs: 1) historical songs that narrate events related to Jewish settlements and the history of various synagogues in Kerala; 2) Biblical songs; and 3) secular songs. These songs are sung only at home and only by women during



CHRISTIAN
MUSICOLOGICAL
SOCIETY OF INDIA

festival gatherings and wedding celebrations. Authorship of these songs are unknown. They have been transmitted orally by older women to younger ones. Some of these songs are set to the melodies of Hebrew songs. Their Vocal quality and ornamentation is typically Keralite. There are songs with regular meters (4/4, 6/4, 3/4, etc.) and symmetrical rhythms, and those that are non-metrical and contain melismatic recitatives. Generally, these songs are sung in groups. There are a few songs that are sung in call-response style. The lead singer sings the stanzas, and the group repeats the chorus line which is called kurukkan (fox). Malayalam songs are seldom performed in public now, and the tradition is going out of vogue. An audio recording of a few Malayalam and Hebrew songs are preserved at the archive in Acharya Palackal Jevass Kendram, at Aluva in central Kerala.

REFERENCES

- Palackal, Joseph. 1995. Jewish Songs of Kerala. Audio recording. Aluva: Acharya Palackal Jevass Kendram.
- Ross, Israel J. 1978. "Cross-cultural Dynamics in Musical Traditions: The Music of the Jews of Cochin." Musica Judaica 2(1):51--72.
- 1979. "Ritual and Music in South India: Syrian Christian Liturgical Music in Kerala." Asian Music 11(1):80--98.
- Spector, Johanna. 1972. "Shingli Tunes of the Cochin Jews." Asian Music 3(2):23--28.



C H R I S T I A N
MUSICOLOGICAL
SOCIETY OF INDIA
REG. NO. 118/IV/2016

For further information
regarding this text Please contact:

info@thecmsindia.org

library@thecmsindia.org

Please join the
'CMSI Benefactors Club'
and support the ongoing projects of
Christian Musicological Society Of India

- DIGITAL LIBRARY
- ARAMAIC PROJECT
- DIRECTORY OF CHRISTIAN SONGS
- ENCYCLOPEDIA OF SYRIAC CHANTS
- MUSIC ICONOGRAPHY
- CHRISTIAN ART