

Garland Encyclopedia of World Music

KERALA: NON-HINDU MUSIC

<A>CHRISTIAN MUSIC

There are 5.6 million Christians in Kerala (census of 1991) who constitute 19.24 % of the total population (29.1 million). According to traditional belief, Christianity came to Kerala in the first century through the preaching of St. Thomas the Apostle. The early Christian community gathered strength in the fourth century with the arrival of Christians from Persia (present-day Iran and Iraq). In the fifth century, the Church in Kerala was affiliated to the Church in Persia, adopting in the process the Chaldean (East Syrian) liturgy. At the dawn of the sixteenth century, the Portuguese missionaries established the Latin rite. Many divisions took place among the Christians from the middle of the seventeenth century. In the early nineteenth century, the Protestant missions became active in Kerala, and all these contacts led to a rich and varied repertory of Christian music, with a confluence of traditions, both indigenous and foreign.

Christian music in Kerala comprises four major areas, reflecting distinctions by genre and location: liturgical music, dance and theater music, music in the home, and devotional music.

Liturgical music. The liturgical music of Kerala includes the music of the Syro-Malabar Church, Nestorian Church, Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite) Church, Syro-Malankara Church, Mar Thoma Church, Latin Church, and the Protestant Churches. Among these, the

Syro-Malabar and the Nestorian Churches follow the Chaldean liturgy in East Syriac. Even after the vernacularization of the liturgy in 1962, some of the ancient Syriac melodies continue to be sung with Malayalam texts along with new hymns.

The Syrian Orthodox and Syro-Malankara Churches adopted the Antiochean liturgy in West Syriac, which is now partly vernacularized. The music of these Churches preserves the ancient "Ekk#ara" (from Syriac "ekk#oro," meaning "root") canon, which prescribes rules regarding the use of the eight modes in the Office and the sacraments. The liturgical music of the Mar Thoma Church is a compendium of West-Syriac chants, Anglican hymns, and Malayalam compositions in Karnatak (South Indian) classical music style. The Latin Church in Kerala vernacularized its liturgy in 1967. Western chants in Latin and the polyphonic style of singing were replaced by hymns in Malayalam sung in unison. In the absence of any standardization, new hymns are being composed and sung independently in each church. Many of the Protestant Churches in Kerala continue polyphonic singing. English hymns and Malayalam translations of German chorales in their original tunes are sung along with Malayalam hymns composed by local musicians.

Dance and theater music. Recently, there has been a revival of some of the traditional Christian theater and dance forms of Kerala such as M#argamka}.li (dance of the Christian way), Paricamu}.t}.tuka}.li (dance with striking shields), and Cavi}.t}.tun#a}.takam (foot stamping drama). M#argamka}.li and Paricamu}.t}.tuka}.li belong to the pre-sixteenth century traditions of the Christians of Kerala. Both dances combine devotion with



entertainment. M#argamka}.li is popular among the Syro-Malabar and the Syro-Malankara Christians. It is performed in groups by men, and since the 1980s by young women (see figure) separately. The songs of M#argamka}.li, which recount the missionary activities and the martyrdom of St. Thomas the Apostle, are performed in call-response style. The dancers themselves sing the songs in unison.

Paricamu}.t}.tuka}.li, an artistic adaptation of the ka}.lari (martial arts) tradition of Kerala, is popular among the Syro-Malabar, Syro-Malankara, Syrian Orthodox, and the Latin Christians. It is performed by men in groups. Dancers carry a sword and a shield and strike them against each other's in keeping with the rhythm of the song. The leader of the group, called #a{'s#an (maestro), sings each line of the song for the group to repeat in unison. The #a{'s#an controls the tempo of the song and the speed of the movement of the dancers.

Cavi}.t}.tun#a}.takam, a theatrical tradition of the Latin Christians of Kerala, dates from the later half of the sixteenth century. The name, "foot stamping drama," refers to the vigorous and high arching steps of male characters that pound the wooden platform, especially during kal#asam (rhythmic cadential formula) at the end of songs. Chivalrous stories of the western Christendom are enacted with songs (in Malayalam) and dances. The actors and, more recently, actresses sing and dance their roles supported by an orchestra placed at the center-stage rear. The orchestra consists of Western (violin and harmonium) and Indian instruments. The music and dance styles in Cavi}.t}.tun#a}.takam are adaptations of the classical and folk traditions of South India.



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Music in the home. Among the songs generally sung in the home environment are wedding songs, }-Rabb#an p#a}.t}.tu (a song about St. Thomas the Apostle, written by Rabban Thomas Maliekkal), historical songs about individual churches and communities, songs for home liturgy (different from the hymns sung in the church), didactic songs, and narrative poems such as Puttan p#ana (a composition which narrates biblical events, written in the eighteenth century by John Ernest Hanxleden). These songs are sung either solo or in group in unison, always without instrumental accompaniment. The melodies of some of these songs show considerable influence of Syriac liturgical music.

Devotional music. A new genre of lyrical songs, called k}-rist#iya bhaktig#ana{.na}.l (Christian devotional songs), became popular in the 1970s with the introduction of cassette technology in Kerala. These songs are recorded with Western and Indian instrumental accompaniment for commercial reproduction through pre-recorded cassettes and gramophone records. On an average, about four hundred pre-recorded cassettes of Christian devotional songs in Malayalam are being released each year. Even non-Christians compose Christian songs for commercial recordings. Currently, one can find two contrasting trends in the Christian music of Kerala: Westernization and Indianization. There is an increasing demand among composers and performers of Christian music for Western musical instruments such as synthesizers, electric guitars, and electronic drum machines. Composers use these instruments in live and recorded performances of liturgical and devotional songs for chordal and rhythmic accompaniment, creating a homophonic texture. The wide



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popularity of westernized arrangements of Christian songs may be seen as an indication of the changes in the musical taste of the people. On the other hand, some composers attempt Indianizing Christian music by drawing inspiration from Indian classical, folk, and bhajan styles. The Christian k#irtanas composed in Malayalam in Karnatak classical music style by George Panjara, and the Christian bhajans composed in Malayalam and Sanskrit, are two examples.

<A>MUSLIM MUSIC

The Muslims of Kerala, known as Mappila(s), have an identity of their own apart from the other Muslim communities in India. Mappilas are the descendants of Arab settlers and Hindu converts to Islam. There are 6.8 million Muslims (23.36 % of the population) in Kerala. The musical tradition (non-liturgical) of the Mappilas is called m#appi}.lappa}.t}.tu (Mappila songs). The tradition is at least seven centuries old and is a blend of Kerala and Arab musical styles. The language of Mappila songs, which is also the spoken language of the Kerala Muslims, is called Arabi-Malayalam. While following Malayalam syntax, Arabi-Malayalam mixes Malayalam words with Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Hindi, Tamil, and Kannada words. Sometimes a single couplet of a song may contain words from four or five languages. The only exception to this is a genre called arabi-baith (Arabic song) that is composed exclusively in Arabic. Singers of Mappila songs have a peculiar voice fluctuation that serves the vocalization of Arabic phonemes.

A wide variety of themes are found in Mappila songs. Most popular among them are praises of the Prophet and Muslim saints, holy wars,

and the love and romance of legendary heroes as well as of common people. M. N. Karassery recently discovered some old Mappila songs that narrate stories from the Hindu epic Ramayana.

A distinctive mark of Mappila songs is their metric structure, called isal (from the Tamil word for music, icai). It is based on a combination of Arabic and Dravidian systems of prosody. The character of an isal is decided by the number of long and short syllables in a line, and the order in which they are placed. There are more than a hundred isals that are popular. A composer may combine parts of two or more isals to create a new one. Therefore, the act of composing a song is called patu-tutu (to tie a song). Some of the norms regarding rhyme and rhythm in tying a song are similar to those of Malayalam prosody. However, the norms regarding tempo are specific to Mappila songs. Slow tempo is called chayal (slanting), and fast tempo, mu-rukkam (tightening).

Music and dance are integral parts of festive occasions among the Mappilas. Oppana (proximity, sitting together) is the most popular among the dances. It is performed by women and men (separately) in groups, on occasions such as weddings and celebrations of the first menstruation of a girl. In women's oppa during weddings, the performers dance around the bedecked bride seated in the center (see figure). Songs are accompanied by intricate steps and clapping of hands. The lead singer sings each line of the song that is repeated by the group. The performance begins in slow tempo and progresses with a variety of meters (7/8, 4/4, 6/8, etc.) and tempi.

Kolkkali (dance with sticks) is performed by men during



wedding celebrations. The dancers hold one-foot long sticks in each hand and move in circles while rhythmically striking the sticks. The leader of the group, called gurukka.l (teacher), controls each stage of the dance, which starts in a slow tempo and builds up speed gradually. He sings each line of the song, and the group repeats it. Daffmu.t}.tu (striking of daff) is popular among certain sections of Mappilas. Daff, an Arab percussion instrument, is played by men in groups in accompaniment to songs of praise of the Prophet and the Muslim saints. Singing is done in a loud voice. On the occasions of the birth and death anniversaries of the Muslim saints, groups of daff players may visit rich Muslim homes and perform for a remuneration. Paricamu.t}.tuka}.li (dance with striking shields), is performed by twelve men as part of wedding celebrations. The Paricamu.t}.tuka}.li of the Muslims and Christians share similar vocabulary of body movements. The songs, however, are different. The songs of the Muslims, known as paricapp#a.t}.tu (shield song), narrate events related to the holy wars.

There are a few musical genres that are not accompanied by dance. Kattup#a.t}.tu (letter-song) is the most popular among them. It has the form of a letter sung by a young woman whose husband lives abroad. Love, pain of separation, longing for reunion, and even detailed description of ones personal life may appear as themes in these songs. Letter-songs, which were once sung a capella in the privacy of Muslim homes, are now performed in public with instrumental accompaniment (harmonium, tabla, guitar, etc.) and are published in pre-recorded cassettes.

The performance contexts of Mappila songs expanded over the

years from home and public places of worship to performance halls, political party conventions, and school and college youth festivals. Even non-Mappilas compose songs for such occasions, and performers, too, come from different religious backgrounds. Change in performance contexts has influenced the choice of musical instruments for accompaniment. Besides traditional instruments such as daff, arav#ana (similar to, but larger than daff), and m#appi}.la}.sehnai (similar to North Indian }.sehnai), synthesizers, electric guitars, and electronic drum machines have found place in contemporary performances for chordal and rhythmic accompaniment.

<A>JEWISH MUSIC

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

Based on the language of the text, the Jewish music repertory of Kerala may be divided into Hebrew songs and Malayalam songs. Hebrew songs --cantillation of the Torah, prayer, and semi-religious songs-- are sung by both 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. Traces of Yemenite and Babylonian styles in the cantillation of the Torah are indications of early contacts of Kerala Jews with those cultures (Ross 1978). The Jews in Kerala do not play musical instruments for accompaniment or for entertainment. However, Sarah and Jacob Cohen, who live at Jew Town in Kochi, recall that till the early 1960s Hindu and Muslim instrumental ensembles used to be invited to perform during wedding celebrations in front of the houses of the bride and the groom.

Jewish songs in Malayalam are of three kinds: historical songs that narrate events related to Jewish settlements and the history of various synagogues in Kerala, biblical songs, and secular songs. These songs are sung at home by women during festive gatherings and wedding celebrations. The authorship is unknown. They have been transmitted orally by older women to younger ones. Some of these songs are set to the melodies of Hebrew songs, but their vocal quality and ornamentation are typically Keralite. There are isometric songs (4/4, 6/4, 3/4, etc.) with symmetrical rhythms, and songs that are non-metrical with melismatic recitatives. Generally, these songs are sung in groups. There are a few songs that are sung in call-response style in which the lead singer sings the stanzas, and the group repeats the chorus line which is called ku}-rukkan (fox). Malayalam songs are seldom performed by Jews now, and the tradition is going out of vogue.

<A>TRIBAL MUSIC

According to the government census of 1991, there are thirty-five tribes in Kerala, each with its own language and music.

Most of these tribes live in cluster-houses called Ur, in the mountainous regions of Wynad, Palakkad, and Idukki districts. Music and dance are part of their daily lives. Women, men, and children sing and dance together. Musical instruments are played only by men. Some of the general characteristics of the tribal music in Kerala are brisk rhythm, predominance of drums over wind and string instruments, call-response style of singing in unison, and a limited number of melodic patterns that are used for almost all occasions.

Death and the annual festival at the local temple are important occasions that call for singing and dancing. Among the tribes in Attappady, in Palakkad district, death is announced by a special beating on two drums, pe}-ra and davil. Men and women dance around the corpse that is placed in the courtyard of the Ur. The dance begins with a rhythmic reproduction of sounds and vocables followed by songs with words. The music is strictly metrical and contains simple melodic phrases of four or eight beats. A reed instrument made of wood, called kokal, is played to double the melody on the upper octave. Singing and dancing continue until the corpse is buried. Anniversaries of death are also occasions for grand celebrations. Weddings and the first menstruation of a girl may also be celebrated with music.

<A>FOLK MUSIC

Kerala has a rich repertory of folk songs, called n#a}.t#o}.tipp#a}.t}.tu (songs that run through the region), sung mostly by the lower castes. These songs are associated with work, rituals, and entertainment. They are a record of the history and the social practices of the people who sing them. They also provide

hints to the pre-classical music traditions of South India.

Folk songs of Kerala may be divided into tekkam p#am}.t}.tu (southern songs) and va}.takkan p#am}.t}.tu (northern songs). Boat songs are a specialty of the South where there are many rivers and back-waters. The North is famous for heroic songs. Agricultural songs are common to both regions.

One of the popular techniques employed in the composition of folk songs is called v#aytt#ari, a combination of sounds and syllables that set the metric structure and, in some cases, the melodic phrase of a song. A v#aytt#ari may be formulated from simulations of sounds produced by percussion instruments, such as cen}.ta, a two-headed cylindrical stick drum, madda}.lam, a barrel drum, and udukku, a relatively smaller (six to eight inches long) hand-drum. The following is an example of a v#aytt#ari sung in koyttup#am}.t}.tu (reaping song):

<EXT> tin tin nam tin tin nam teyannam t#ar#o,
tin tin nam teyannam tin tin nam t#ar#o

<TX> The role of a composer-singer is to fit words or lines into the structure of the v#aytt#ari. In the process, he or she may borrow lines from popular songs, or compose lines instantly. The act of composing a song, therefore, is called p#am}.t}.tuke}.t}.tuka (to tie a song). When a v#aytt#ari is used in a performance, the leader sings first the v#aytt#ari once or twice for the group to repeat. After that the song is sung in call-response form.

<A>FILM MUSIC



Film is the most popular form of entertainment in Kerala. Seventy-five to a hundred films in Malayalam are released every year. Songs and dances are essential elements for the success of a film. There may be three to six songs in a movie. About a hundred and thirty-five music directors, all men, some of whom are from other states, work for the Malayalam film industry. It is in the films that every genre of music --from Indian classical and folk to Western pop and rap-- finds a niche. However, almost ninety-five percent of film songs have the same format: three stanzas of four lines each which, in performance practice, takes an A B A C A form. Stanza A serves as a refrain. The stanzas are interspersed with instrumental interludes. Western and Indian musical instruments are used for the orchestration of these songs. A song may have an approximate duration of five minutes.

Film songs get the maximum televising and broadcasting time in Kerala as elsewhere in India. They are also released in pre-recorded cassettes, and more recently, in compact discs. In popularity, play-back singers are next only to movie actors and actresses and politicians.

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<CAP>1. M#argamka.li performed by the students of St. Mary's Girls High School, Fort Kochi. Photo courtesy Rashtra Deepika.

<CAP>2. Oppana of women performed by the students of the Holy Cross High School, Thellakom. Photo courtesy Rashtra Deepika.

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