



ARAMAIC PROJECT

Syncretic Syriac Culture of the St. Thomas Christians before 1500 AD.

(LRC Seminar 60 - 28 January, 2022)

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We are embarking on a journey into the distant past in the history of the St. Thomas Christians in Kerala. We do not have a clear roadmap for this journey. Our forefathers were not enthusiastic about leaving much documentary evidence of their life and activities. However, they liked to sing and narrate stories and occasionally dance to them. As a result, a rich oral tradition and a handful of material objects are all that we have to reconstruct the period under our consideration. For that reason, we may take a diachronic approach to traverse uncharted territory. We may start from the present and dive into the deeper recess of the past. This will be a reverse chronological approach. Along the way, we may have to draw heavily from the writings of foreign visitors to the land. We may never know how far these foreigners were biased in their eagerness to record the history unfolding in front of their eyes. Our tool will be informed imagination. We shall employ all the available data to imagine what else could have been there.

There are three parts to this presentation. The first part's focus will be on the status of the Syriac language. Here, we shall explore the extent of Syriac literacy among the Christians in Kerala, how the Christians held on to an Aramaic way of thinking, and how the non-Christians responded to the Syriac language and culture. In the second part, we shall examine the unique features of the Syriac music repertory of the Kerala Christians. The third part will focus on the ecumenical dimension of the Thoma Mārggam, and how it served as a survival strategy for organic growth of Christian faith in the multi-religious milieu of South India.

So, let us start part 1 from Broadway at Ernakulam.



Shops with English Name Boards at Broadway, Ernakulam

This photo was taken two weeks ago at Broadway, a busy commercial street at Ernakulam. The photo shows the signboards of the shops. The language of Kerala is Malayalam, but the signboards publish the name of the shops in English.

The language of Kerala is Malayalam. Nevertheless, the signboards carry the names of shops in English. It means that the English language still carries an element of prestige and is a sign of education and bilingual literacy of the people.

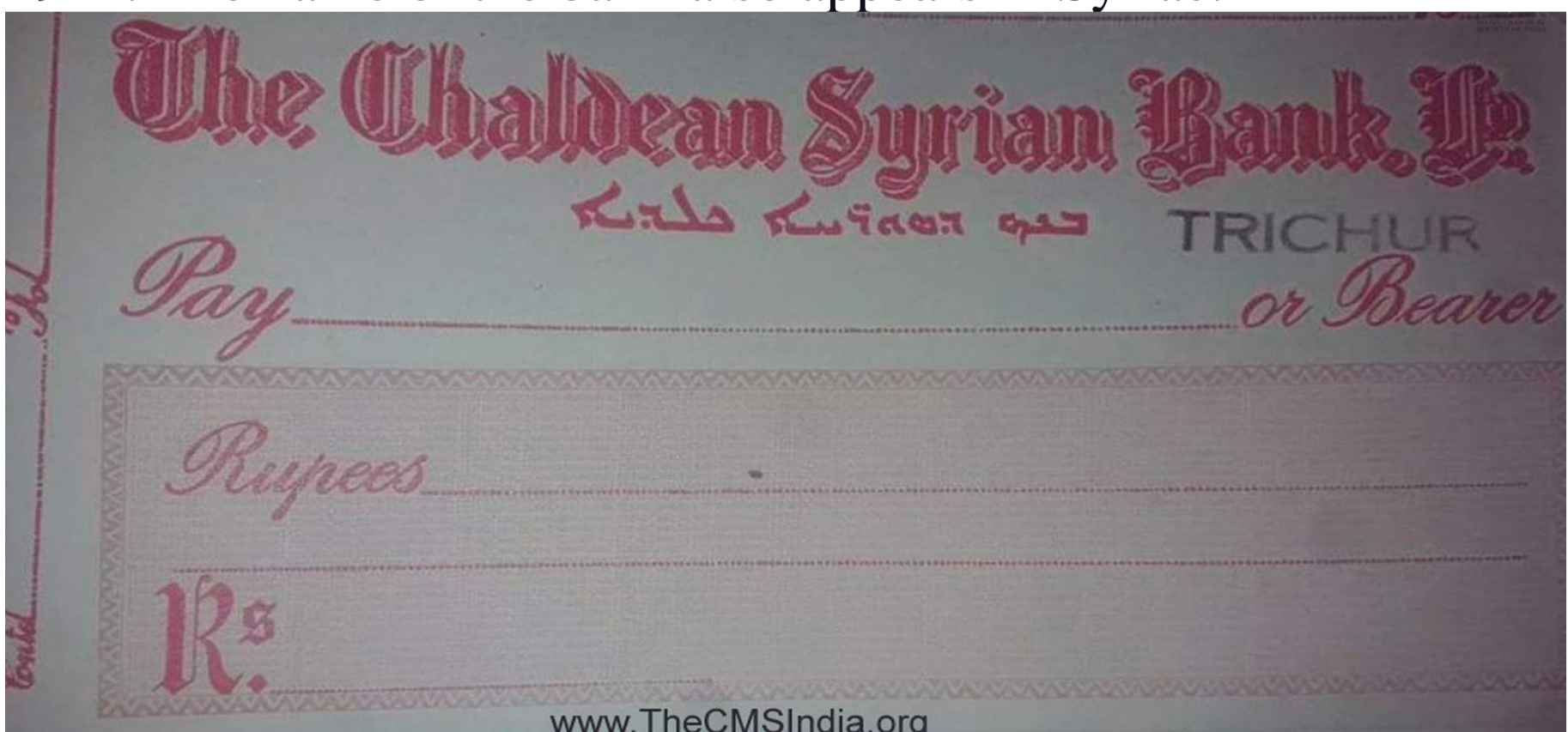
Now let us go a little further, to the Archbishop's House at Ernakulam



Capstone of Ernakulam Archbishop's house in Syriac & Malayalam

The two images show the Capstone in Syriac and Malayalam.

This is a Chaldean Syrian Bank check leaf in Thrissur from about 1914. The name of the bank also appears in Syriac.



Cheque leaf of the Chaldean Syrian Bank in Thrissur. (1914)

Let us go further back in time to St. Mary's Forane Church at Pallippuram. The side altar, in Baroque style, was built probably in the seventeenth century.



ܠܥܠܡܢ ܕܝܘܡܝܢ
ܠܥܠܡܢ ܕܝܘܡܝܢ

Ha ennā amakōn
īṭāyē adammā
l'šulāmmā d'yawmātā

“Behold,
I will be with you
until the end of the days”
(Matthew 8:20)

Side Altar of St. Mary's Forane Church, Pallippuram, Kerala.

A sentence in Syriac is part of the ornamentation of the altar. It reads: *Ha ennā amakōn īṭāyē adam mā l'šulāmmā d'yawmātā* "Behold, I will be with you until the end of the days" (Matthew 8:20).

Going further, to Manjapra.

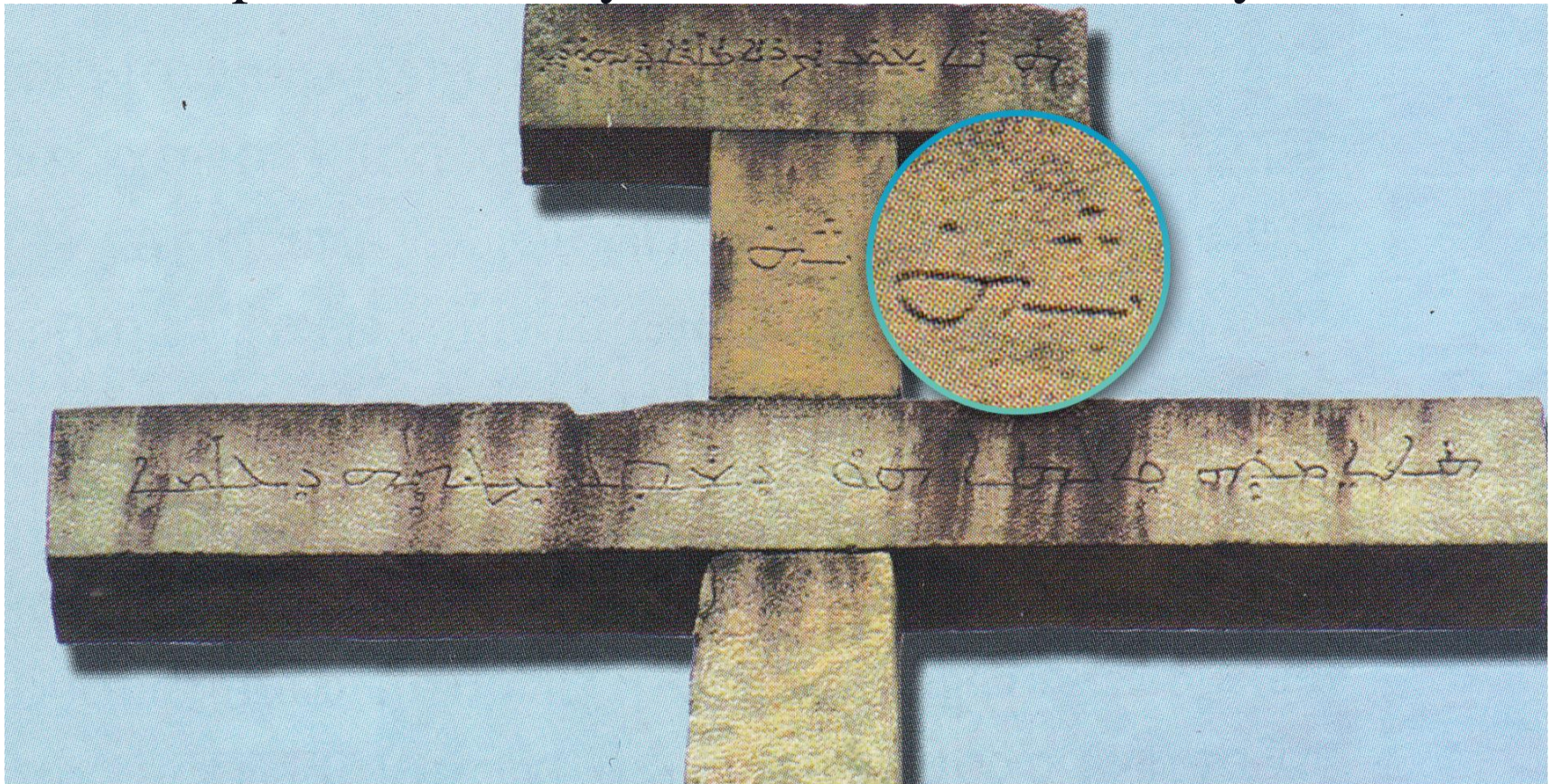
The façade of the Holy Cross Church, Manjapra (Est. 1401) carries an inscription in Syriac.



The façade with Syriac inscriptions at Holy Cross forane Church, Manjapara

Now let us go to Koratty.

There are important inscriptions on the top of the open-air Cross. The most important is the symbol of Yah with Trinity.

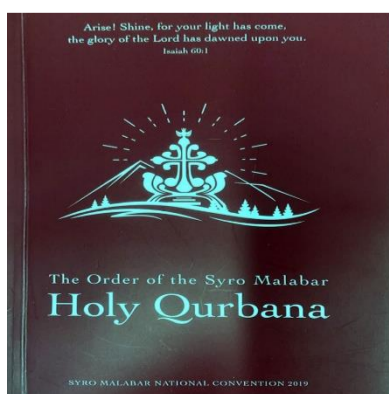


Inscriptions on the top of the open air Cross St. Mary's forane Church, Koratty

There are numerous other public displays of information in the Syriac script. It means that Syriac enjoyed the high status that English enjoys today at one point in time. As late as the 1950s, Clergy would write letters in Malayalam but sign their name in Syriac script. My baptism certificate is an example. Public display of information in Syriac script indicates the intimacy of the language that Christians in Kerala had.

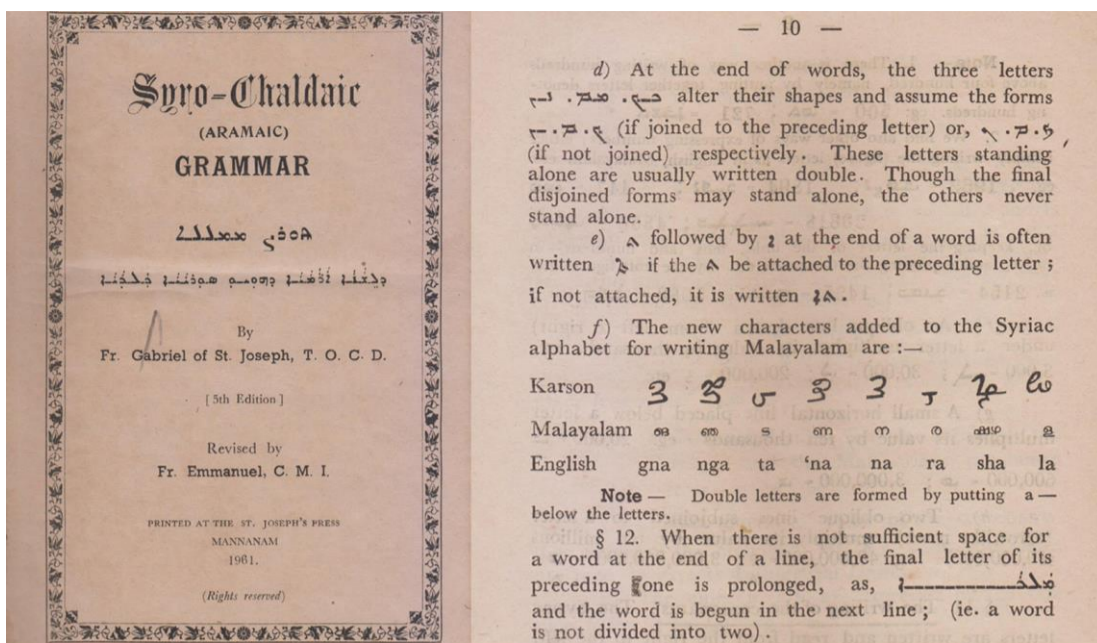
Karson

The Kerala Christians developed a system of writing Malayalam in the Syriac script, known as Karson. They even created scripts for additional phonemes that are part of the Malayalam language. The practice of Karson is yet another example of the Syriac literacy of the Kerala Christians prior to the modern era.



Resurrection Hymn
 A: Lāku mārā d'kollā mawdēnan
 ulāk iṣō miṣihā m'sabhīnan
 dathu mnahmānā dpagrāin
 Wathu pārōqā thāwā dnawṣāsan
 C: Ashingēs daya'is idaiy, Weskarakes l'Madbahak
 Mar'ya Lāku mārā d'kollā mawdēnan
 ulāk iṣō miṣihā m'sabhīnan
 dathu mnahmānā dpagrāin
 Wathu pārōqā thāwā dnawṣāsan
 A: Shuw'ha L'Awa U'lawara wal'Ruha D'Qudsha Min
 ALam wadamma L'alam, Amen Wamen
 Lāku mārā d'kollā mawdēnan
 ulāk iṣō miṣihā m'sabhīnan
 dathu mnahmānā dpagrāin
 Wathu pārōqā thāwā dnawṣāsan
 S: Let us pray, peace be with us.
 C: My Lord, You are truly the One who raises our bodies.
 You are the Savior of our souls, and the preserver of
 our lives. We are bound always to thank, adore, and
 glorify You. The Lord of all, forever.
 A: Amen.

Front cover of the missalette printed for the celebration of Qurbana at the Syro Malabar National Convention 2019 in Chicago (August 1-4). Page 16 from the missalette with the Resurrection hymn in Syriac written in the Latin script.



Syro Chaldaic (Aramaic) Grammar by Fr. Gabriel of St. Joseph, T.O.C.D.
5th edition, revised by Fr. Emmanuel Thelly, CMI (Mannanam, 1961).

Page 10 from the *Syro Chaldaic (Aramaic) Grammar* by Fr. Gabriel of St. Joseph, T.O.C.D. 5th edn, revised by Fr. Emmanuel Thelly, CMI (Mannanam, 1961). Addition to the characters of Syriac alphabet to write Malayalam.

Syriac in liturgy

There is no dispute among the scholars regarding the use of the Syriac Anaphora of Mar Addai and Mar Mari, the earliest extant Anaphora in Kerala. At home, the Syriac Christians celebrated the Pesha meal once a year on Holy Thursday. The home ritual was referred to as "[Pesaha] Appam Murikkal, which is a literal translation of the biblical phrase "Breaking of bread." It is possible that before the evolution of ritualized liturgy, the early Christians in Kerala followed home liturgy similar to the practice of early Christians in Palestine and Antioch.

The liturgical terms that the St. Thomas Christians adopted into their vocabulary for conversations on religious matters testify to the Aramaic way of thinking. We shall examine two terms as examples: *Qurbana* and *Madbaha*.



While the Greek-speaking Antiochene Christians came up with Eucharistia to refer to the ceremony of Breaking Bread, the Syriac-speaking Christians used the Aramaic word Qurbana for the same

event. The term Qurbana has a long history of usage. For example, in the book of Genesis, chapter four verses 3-6, the word appears three times in different forms about the sacrifice of Cain and Abel.

Similarly, the word madbaha comes from the root, dbah, which means to sacrifice. It has a direct connection to the altar for sacrifice in the Jerusalem temple and evokes stark images of blood, fire, smoke, the smell of burning carcasses and cereals, etc. Words such as these convey more than literal meanings; they also carry emotions as well as layers of meanings that accumulated over the centuries out of usages by different communities at different locations.

Old Testament names for children: Local adaptations of Syriac words.

It seems Old Testament names are more popular than the New Testament names.

Aramaic names for children in Kerala

Syriac	Malayalam Names	Local Names
Abraham	എബ്രാഹം/അബ്രാഹം	Awara, Awaran, Awarachan, Awdo, Awadachan
Anna	അന്ന	Annamma, Annaumma, Annu, Annakkutty
Eli	ഏലി	Eliswa, Elizabeth, Eliamma, Elamma, Elikkutty
Eliazar	ഏലിയാസർ	Lazar
Mariam	മറിയം	Mariamamma, Mariyaamma, Mariyakkutty
Mathai	മത്തായി	Matthappan, Mathu, Mathachan, Maathachan, Mathayichan, Mathukutty
Thomma	തോമ്മ	Thomman, Thommi, Thommachan, Thommikkunju
Yacob	യാക്കോബ്	Chacko, Chakkappan, Chackochan
Yawsep	യൗസേപ്പ്	Yawseppachan, Appachan, Ouseppachan, Pappachan, Pappu, Pappootty
Yohannan	യോഹന്നാൻ	Ulahannan
Yob	യോബ്	Yobachan
Zacharia	സഖരിയ	Scaria, Karia, Kariachan, Cheriyan, Cheriyaachan, kuncharia, Kunchariyaachan

It may indicate a Jewish background to the first Christian communities in Kerala. It is evident that Jews and Christians lived in harmony in Kerala and shared many social customs. Both communities enjoyed high social status in the society.

Syriac words in the context of family prayer

(outside the domain of official liturgy)

Aramaic Project-115 <https://youtu.be/ValovwJzyoU>

The following excerpt shows how Syriac words became part of family prayer vocabulary.



Here, we see an elderly couple making the sign of the Cross with the minor doxology before the Angelus. The minor doxology in Malayalam consists of four words; two of them are Syriac.

The first and the third persons of the Trinity are referred to in Syriac: Bawa and Ruha d'qudsa. The second person is invoked as Puthran (a Malayalam adaptation of the Sanskrit Putr," meaning son). Interestingly, the Proto-Dravidian-Tamil speaking Christians in Kerala had already appropriated the Aramaic word Abba with a slight change in the pronunciation of the second syllable for a male parent as Appa. Instead of using Abba or Appa, the Christians used Bawa to distinguish God the Father from biological father.

The video also shows an example of greeting the elders in Malayalam, "praise be to Jesus Christ." In this greeting, Jesus Christ is referred to in Syriac, Iso Misha, the archaic Aramaic form instead of Yesu Christu derived from the Greek translation of the original Hebrew-Aramaic form. Until the introduction of West Syriac in Kerala, Jesus was always referred to as ISO and not Yesu. This was, in effect, a part of the Aramaic way of thinking. By using such words, St. Thomas Christians celebrated their intimate connection to the time and place of the Jesus event.

Interestingly, both these examples are the seamless juxtaposing of Aramaic and Malayalam words. What is more interesting is that the Syriac words are inflected according to the rules and syntax of

Malayalam grammar. Such intriguing intimacy can happen only due to centuries of respectful interactions among the speakers of the respective languages. It is as if the Aramaic words have become native through centuries of familiarity. (We shall revisit this video during our discussion on Raza).

The Syriac words in the Malayalam language

As a result of the prolonged presence of the Syriac language in Kerala, many Syriac words found their way into the Malayalam parlance. It is yet another indication of the communal harmony among the people of Kerala.

Syriac words (non-religious) in Malayalam parlance

Syriac	Malayalam	Transliteration	Meaning
Ar'a	അറ, ഭൂമി	ara	earth, granary
Awdā	അവ്വപറയുക	awdaparayuka	servant, speak like a servant
Emmā	അമ്മ	Amma	Mother
Ēn, Ennā	ഞാൻ	ñān	I (First Person Singular)
Kuršyā	കുർസി	kurši	seat, chair
Mrad	മറുതല	Maruthala	to rebel, resist
Pārah	പറവ	parawa	flying, bird
Qālā	കോലാഹലം	kōlāhalam	voice, sound, noisy
Qbar	കബറിടം	kabaritam	to bury, tomb
Šarri	ആരംഭിക്കുക	šari (ready)	to begin
Sātānā	സാത്താൻ	sātān	devil
Šukrā	ശുക്രൻ	šukran	falsehood
Šūlāmā	സുല്ല്	sullū	End
Šwātā (plural Ašyūtā)	ആശ്വാസം	āšwāsam	healing, cure, consolation
Swārtā	സദ്വാർത്ത	sadwārtha	news, good news
Tar'a	തറ	tara	gate, floor
Turgama	തർജ്ജമ	targgma	translation

Syriac in the literary tradition of Kerala

We may now turn to the literary tradition in Kerala from the first half of the eighteenth century. The original title of the famous Puthen Pana of Arnos Pathiri is a prime example of combining Syriac and Malayalam words following the Malayalam syntax: the title is Kuthasappana, meaning "holy pana", a combination of the Syriac word Qudasa ("holy") and Pana (an epic poetic genre in Malayalam).

കേരള സർവകലാശാല

ഭാഷാഗ്രന്ഥാവലി-അങ്കം 107

കൂതാശപ്പാന



പ്രസാധകൻ

കെ. രാഘവൻ പിള്ള, ബി. ഏ. (ഓണേഴ്സ്)

പി എച്ച്. ഡി., (ലണ്ടൻ)

കുറേറൻ

ഓറിയൻറൽ മാനുസ്ക്രിപ്റ്റ്സ് ലൈബ്രറി

തിരുവനന്തപുരം

1960/1135

Hanxleden's work was intended for all Christians of all denominations, not just for Syriac Christians. Hanxleden's choice of the title might have been intentional. First of all, Hanxleden presumed that the Aramaic word Qudasa was familiar to the Malayalam-speaking Keralites. Second, Hanxleden was aware of the tendency of the Kerala Christians to modify the pronunciation of Aramaic words for the convenience of using lesser energy.

Syriac words in secular Malayalam movies


www.TheCMSIndia.org




Film : Makane Ninakku Vendi

Music : G. Devarajan

Lyricist : Vayalar RamaVarma

Singer : P. Susheela, Renuka

CMSINDIA
MA-MAL-049-DCS-498

Syriac words in secular Malayalam movies
Bavakkum Puthranum Parisudha Ruhakum

www.Library.TheCMSIndia.org

Conclusion (Part I)

The St. Thomas Christians took pride in preserving the Syriac language. They considered it a privilege to know the "language of the Lord." By keeping Syriac words in liturgy, they felt connected with Jesus and His times. When faced with challenges, they stood their ground to keep the language. Over the centuries, Syriac language was an essential component of the Kerala culture. There are several signs of the intimacy of the Syriac language to the Kerala culture. One, the language was so prevalent and familiar that Christians and non-Christians alike were comfortable inflecting Syriac words by applying the rules of Malayalam grammar and syntax rules. Malayalam speakers adopted several Syriac words into their vocabulary. Public display of religious texts in Syriac script indicates that Syriac literacy was prevalent among the St. Thomas Christians until at least the eighteenth century. Even a century after Syriac literacy diminished, Syriac Christians continued to use Syriac words in their daily prayers and conversations. Non-Christians respected and appreciated the attachment of the Christians to the Syriac language. They felt comfortable using Syriac words in popular songs that dealt with religious topics.

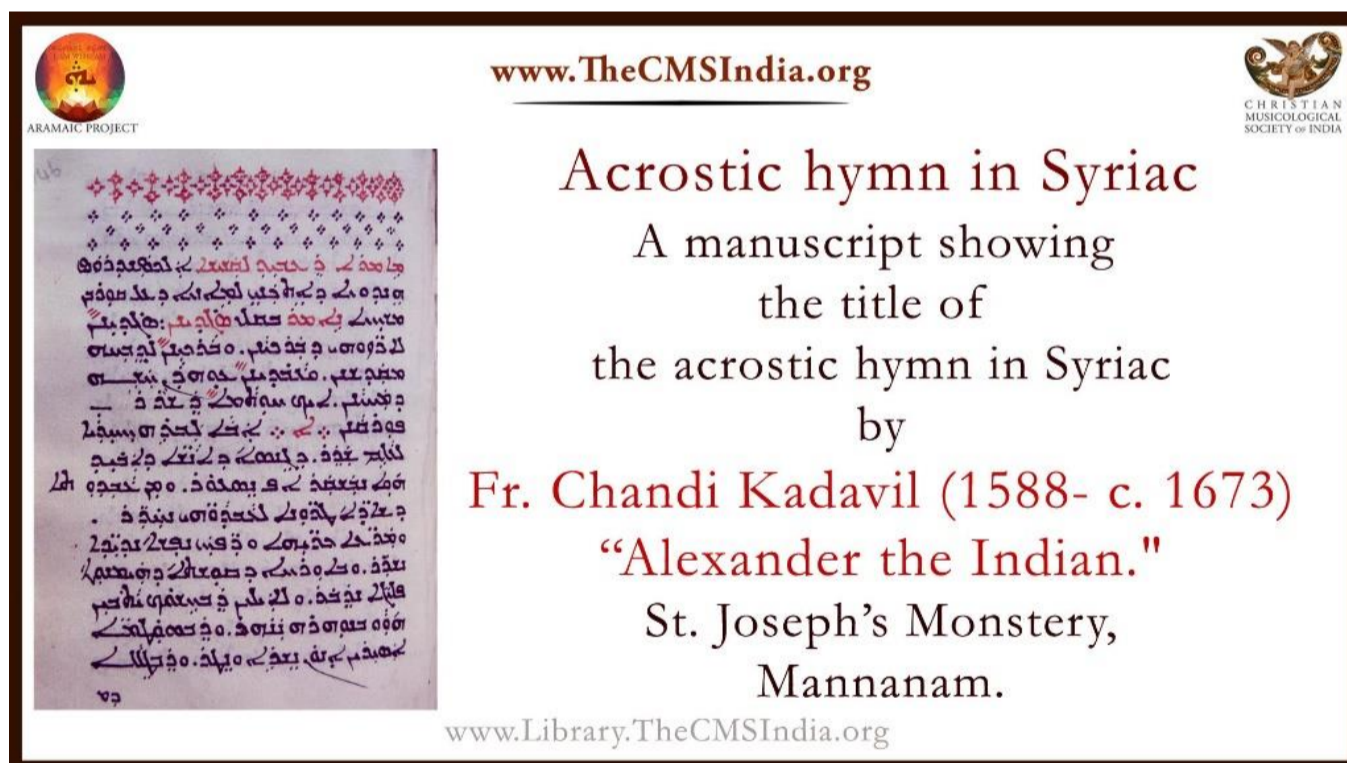
PART II

The unique place of Syriac Liturgy & Music in the cultural history of India & early Christianity.

From language, now we move on to the music tradition that the Kerala Christians developed over the centuries. We shall make an analytical study of a few musical samples from the liturgy: one chant from the Hudra, one chant from the prayers for festival occasions, and two chants from the Raza, the most solemn form of Qurbana.

‘Sagdinan Mar’ and the solution to the Christological controversies.

This is the 18th strophe from the hymn, "Brīk hannānā" ("blessed is the merciful one") from the night prayers for Sundays in Advent and Christmas. The hymn's authorship is attributed to Babai the Great (c. 551 – c. 628). In just two verses, the author puts to rest the Christological controversies that haunted the Church, causing much pain and divisions.



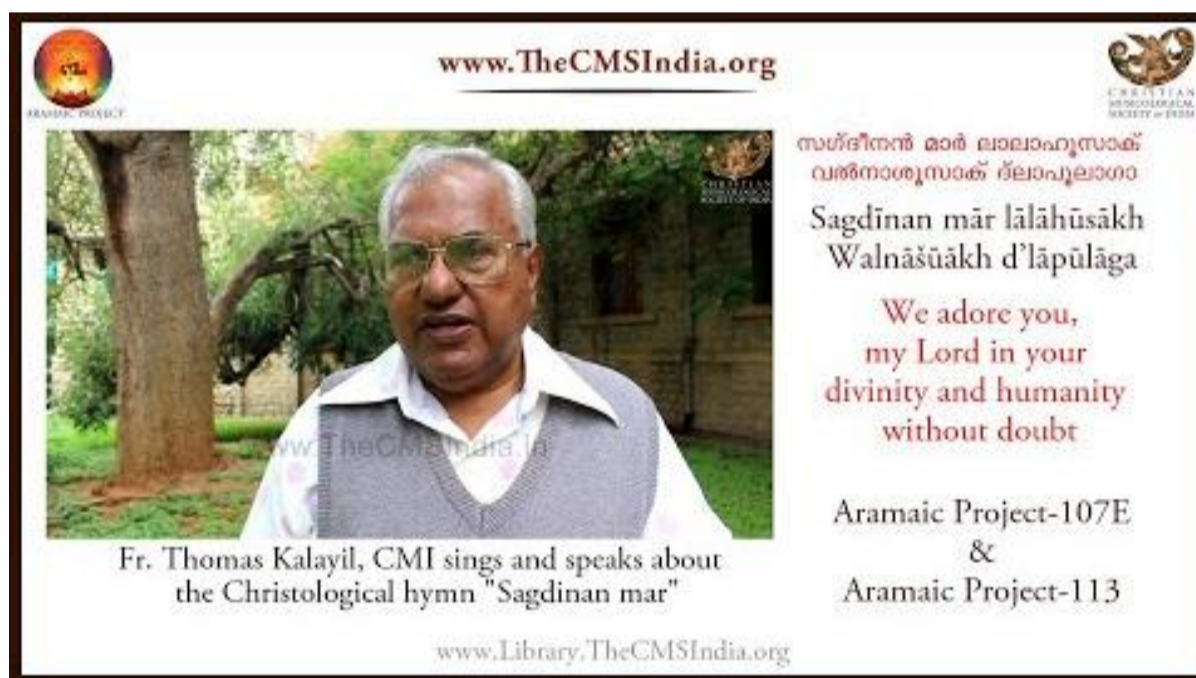
The earliest reference to the hymn in Kerala is in the acrostic hymn in Syriac, written by Fr. Chandi Kadavil, popularly known as "Alexander the Indian" (1588- c.

1673). Fr. Kadavil wrote the acrostic hymn according to the meter and melody of "Sagdīnan mār."

It means that the hymn was already famous among the St. Thomas Christians at the dawn of the seventeenth century (i. e., before the Coonan Cross Oath (1653) and the following divisions in the community.

There is a play on the shades of meaning of the final phrase "lā pūlāga." It can mean "without doubt" or "without division." The alternate meanings appear in the brackets in the translation given above. The hymn resolves the long-standing Christological controversies (Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon). The special significance the East Syriac Churches in India gave to this hymn is an indication that these Churches were not subject to those controversies. The hymn is a perfect example of the interface of music, poetry, pedagogy, dogma, theology, liturgy, and catechesis.

The Hudra prescribes the couplet to be sung three times. At some point in history, definitely before the seventeenth century, the St. Thomas Christians in India treated this couplet as a separate song and created a new melody.



The first point to talk about is the performance practice of Fr. Kalayil's version.

The melody is sung three times in three ascending pitch registers, low, medium, and high. It is a way of

drawing attention to the importance of a text or an event. We use this technique in social ceremonies like Madhuras wekkal during wedding receptions.

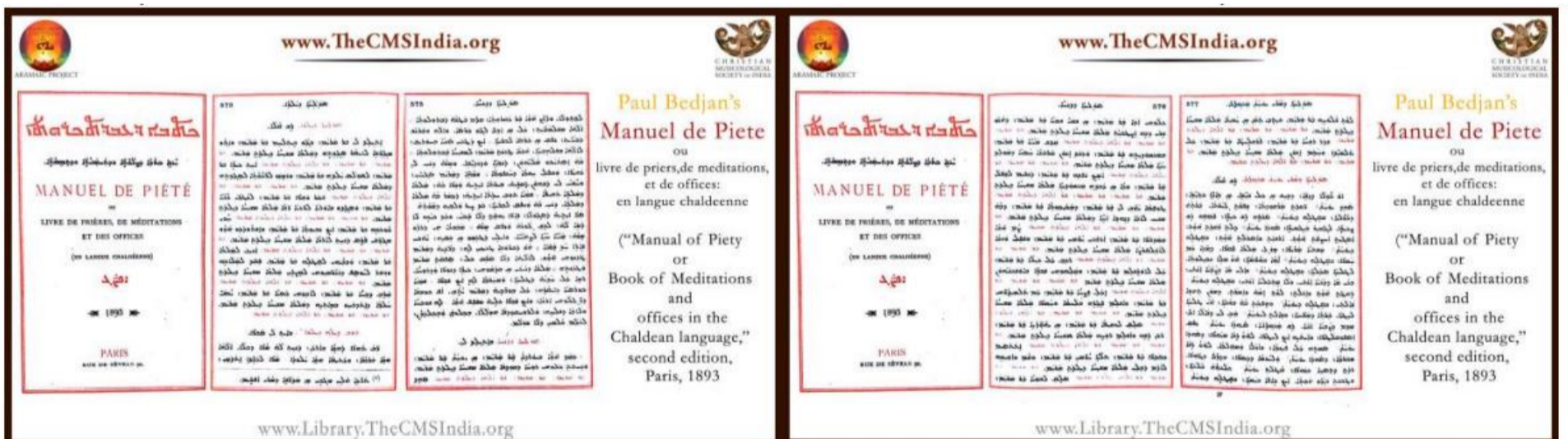
Fr. Kalayil's version of the melody draws attention to the classification of Syriac melodies. The ascending cadence on the first phrase of Sagdinan Mar's first phrase is special. This is the only instance of this version in our digital library. All other versions have descending cadence. The ascending cadence makes the melody different from the melody of Maran iso Malka sgida. In every other respect, Fr. Kalayil's version is the same as that of Māran īšō malkā sgīdā dazkā b'hššē (h) l'mawtā trūnā. Thus, a simple cadence can differentiate one melody from the other. This should be considered as an example of the musical ingenuity of the Syriac composers.

The resilience of this melody is a matter of particular interest: in the 1970s, when Fr. Abel created a version of Requiem Qurbana in Malayalam, he used this melody to write a post-communion song. ‘Sahanam wazhiyay maranathinmel’. It seems this is the only place this melody is sung currently in the Malayalam liturgy.

Bar Maryam: Mariology in music.

This very popular chant is significant for its Christological and Mariological implications. The refrain in this chant is the key. ‘Bar Maryam, Bar Maryam, Bar alaha d’yeldaz Maryam’. The child that Mary gave birth to, is the son of God. In other words, Mary is the mother of the Son of God. The author masterfully resolved the Christological controversies of the fifth century that gave rise to bitter divisions among the followers of the Christian faith (not in India, though).

Unlike the previous chant, we have no information on the author of the text or the melody of this chant.



Paul Bedjan’s ‘Manuel de Piété’- Manuel of Piety/ Book of Meditations & Offices in Chaldean Language (1893)

The earliest available version of the text is from Paul Bedjan's *Manuel de Piété ou livre de priers, de meditations, et de offices: en langue chaldeene* ("Manual of Piety or Book of Meditations and offices in the Chaldean language," second edition, Paris, 1893,pp. 573-575). The chant appears under the title "sōgītā d'yaldā" (dialogue song for the Nativity).



The Knanaya community sometimes claims this chant to be theirs. That claim is not tenable. The melody as we know it is common to all the East-Syriac churches in Kerala. The melody is applied to other texts for different

liturgical and non-liturgical contexts. By the way, this may be the oldest available Christian song in India.

RAZA: a liturgical revolution in Kerala.

According to Fr. Varghese Pathikulangara, CMI, and Fr. Pauly Maniyattu, the Raza in its present form in the Syro Malabar Church is a unique contribution of the St. Thomas Christians." However, the terminology, the characteristic chant genres, and the rituals associated with them were already in vogue in the East Syriac churches.

For example, the veneration of the Cross, Onita d' Qanke, the Turgama, and the Onita d' Evangelion are all familiar to the East Syriac tradition. What is unique to the Syro Malabar tradition is the rite of prostration at the Bema along with the invocation of the Holy Ruha. This particular rite deserves more attention. The placement of this rite after the dismissal of the catechumens and before the offertory is noteworthy. The accompanying chant is in the form of a dialogue between the celebrant, the deacon, and the choir. The celebrant refers to the Holy Ruha sanctifying the body and blood on the altar. Overall, the rite assumes the nature of a mini-musical drama. The Syro Malabar clergy took all these elements and created a design to expand the first part of the Qurbana and called it Raza.

That our forefathers were capable of creating it, is remarkable. We do not see such an attempt anywhere else in the Catholic world. Some priests knew enough scripture and liturgical theology to expand on the liturgical tradition that they received from the Persian Church. The Syriac clergy in Kerala had the knowledge base and the audacity to improve upon a received tradition. They were immensely proactive. We shall take a closer look at two unique chants to Raza

‘Sliwa Dahwa Lan’ for the veneration of the Cross

Here is the version from the Syro Malabar tradition. TRACK 10 from QAMBEL MARAN.

Now, let us listen to two of the several melodies of the same text from the Chaldean Syrian Church of the East. REKHA AND AGNA .



The inclusion of the public veneration of the Cross in the most solemn celebration of Qurbana indicates the special place that the Cross had in the spirituality of the St. Thomas Christians. The Cross became an object of worship and a

work of art to behold and meditate. At this point we may revisit the video we watched earlier.

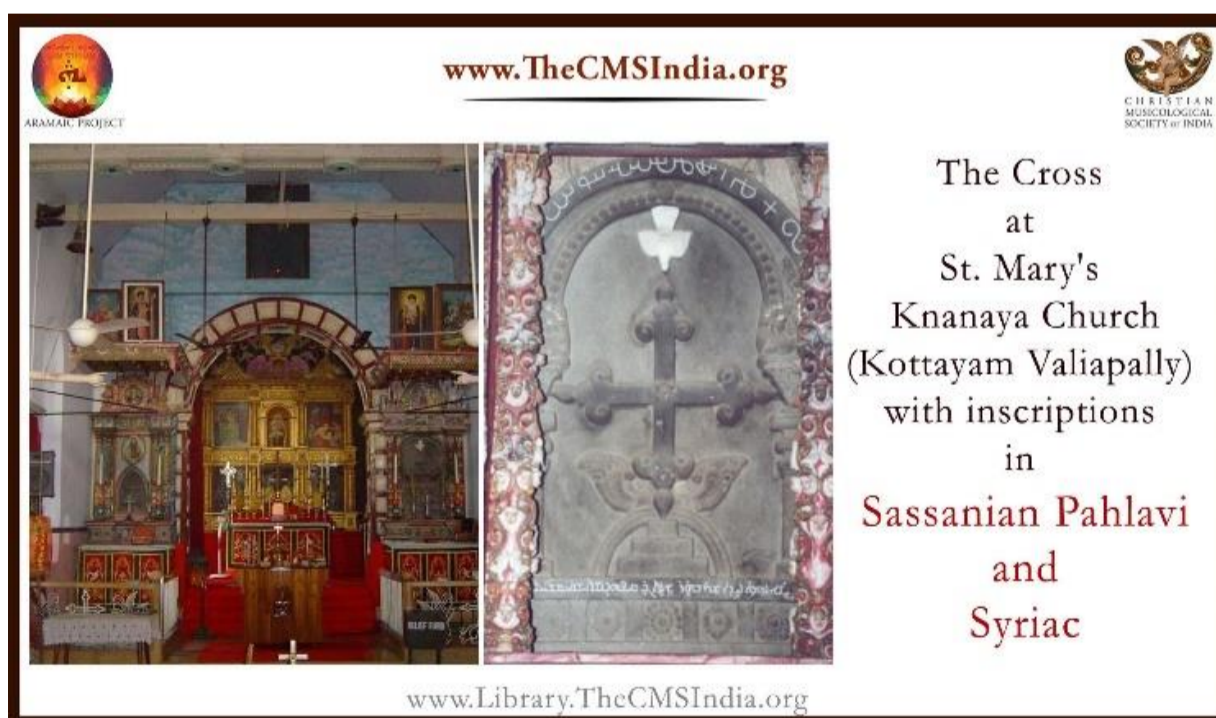
Here we witness an unusual phenomenon - the addition of a preamble to the text to accompany the sign of the cross with a minor doxology.

The preamble says: “By the sign of the Holy Cross, deliver us from our enemies, O our God,” and then the minor doxology. We may assume that what we saw in the video is the remnant of practice among Catholic Syriac Christians for centuries.

Where did this practice originate and at what point in history? When and where did it start among the Syriac Christians in Kerala? Do all Syriac Christians follow this practice? In any case, we may assume that what we saw in the video is the remnant of a practice that existed among the Catholic Syriac Christians for centuries.

What follows are a few musical observations on the accompanying chant for the veneration of the Cross from the Syro Malabar Church. There are five stanzas in the chant with five different incipits.

It seems the focus of the composer of the melody was more on the theological content of the text than on the words and the syntax. However, the song's theme is the Cross, the mood of the song is triumphant. The consistent use of the ascending leap of a perfect fourth from ‘**Sa**’ to ‘**Ma**’ on the opening word of all the verses sets the mood of the song. It is almost like a word-painting of action of raising the sliwa high above the head as a sign of victory.



The melody exemplifies the Pauline theology of the Cross in Galatians 6:14 But may I never **boast** except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." Mark the word "boast." It seems the word boast inspired

the composer of the melody in setting the mood. The melody alludes to resurrection rather than crucifixion.

Use of meaningless syllables in Syriac chants: A unique phenomenon. Another example of a syncretic style.



O des damman is a *Turgma*, interpretative song that is intended to prepare the congregation to listen to the day's reading from the epistle. There is an addition of a two-syllable vocable, **inja**, at

the end of each verse to complete the melodic phrase.

The printed version does not include the vocable. The singers add this for a comfortable cadence in the melodic phrase. The practice of adding nonsense syllables as an acceptable practice in Malayalam poetry and the performance practice of folk songs in Malayalam.

There is a caveat here. The sample we used for this discussion is from the CD Qambel Maran. The participants in this recording were all CMI priests who grew up in the Syriac tradition of the Syro Malabar Church. Therefore, the question remained if this phenomenon of adding a nonsense syllable to Syriac poetic text was part of the performance practice prevalent among the singers of the CMI congregation.



The answer is in Fr. Mattam who pointed out a curious piece of information. The printed text did not include the **"inga"**, but added a few dots indicating a melodic space for the singers to fill in with inga. It means the

practice of singing was in place many years before printing the missal.

In any case, what is significant here is that our forefathers were comfortable in combining the sacred with the secular. They could combine liturgical singing with aesthetic enjoyment; they could pray and enjoy the prayer as well.

Possibility for a music theory of Syriac chants in Kerala.

The East Syriac liturgy contains an extensive repertory of Chants of various kinds. The diversity of poetic genres, styles of melodies, scales, compositional techniques, performance practice, and the application of a unique concept of rhythm deserve musicological attention. Such a study may pave the way for a music theory of East Syriac chants in Kerala. For convenience, we shall take an analytical look at a few samples from the current chant repertory of the Syro- Malabar Church. This may be the beginning of a new approach to the study of Christian music and may highlight the possibility of Christian musicology in India.

Before proceeding further, we may consider that the North Indian (Hindustani) classical music and the Syriac chants have a shared history. Both are the products of intercultural communications between India and West Asia. The Syriac liturgy and chants originated in West Asia but found a life of their own in India. Besides the factors related to the pronunciation of certain syllables and general vocal inflections, the same chant texts are sung with different melodies in the Middle East and India. So much so that we can treat the Syriac musical repertory in Kerala as a separate entity.

For a sample study, we shall revisit the chant from Raza that we discussed earlier: **Sliwa Dahwa Lan**. The anonymous composer designed a memorable melody for the text. The melody consists of a hexatonic scale (six notes): **S.A. GA MA PA DHA NI**(1). However, the melody revolves around a major tetrachord with the Madhyam (**Ma**) as the tonic. The Sa is used only as an approach note to the tonic **M.A.** (i. e., the melody revolves around this note) as in **Sa-Ma-Pa Dha Ni Dha Pa**.

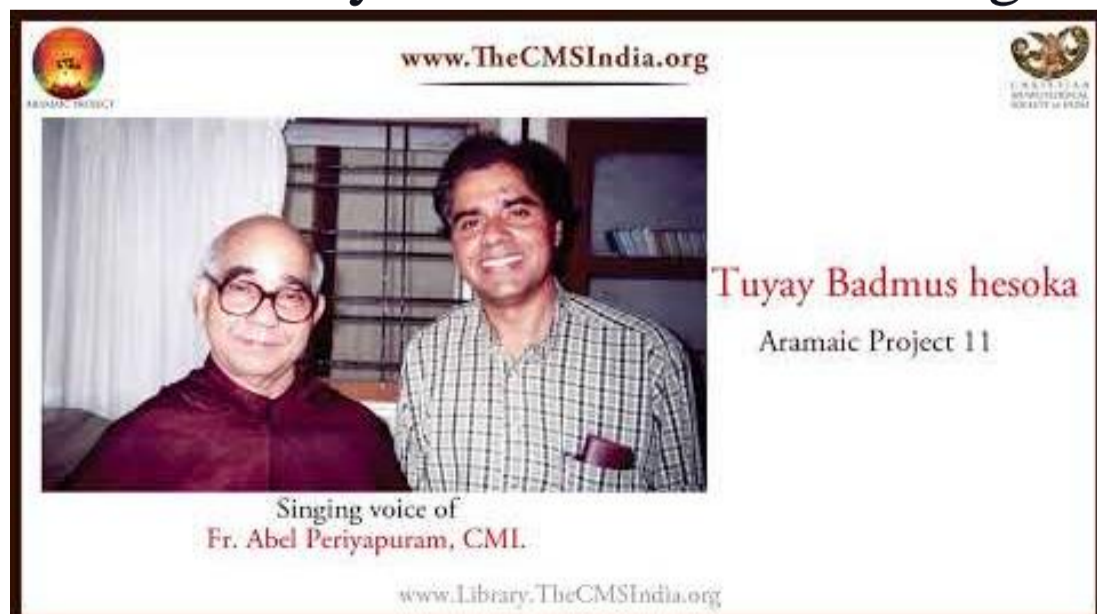
The melody is unique for two reasons. First, the incipit and the four verses in the strophe begin with a leap of a perfect fourth from Sa to Ma on the opening words. **We- hu, Sli – wa, We – hu, Hu – mar, We-nas**. Starting a melody by a leap of a perfect fourth in all the verses of a strophe is unusual in the Syriac music repertory and Indian classical music traditions.

Second, the anonymous composer of the melody employs a unique compositional technique. The melody of the first three verses ends on **P.A.**, a tone above the tonic **Ma**. Only the cadence on the ultimate phrase of the final verse, the melody comes back to **Ma**. This is to create a sense of incompleteness. It keeps the singer and the listener in suspense and a sense of curiosity to hear what comes next. Finally, the melody resolves on the tonic **Ma** at the end of the final verse.

The composer of the melody ingeniously employed a technique that people use during daily conversations and orators use in persuasive speech. For example, the rise and fall of the voice in the adage: Areem thinnu - Asarichinem kadichu - ennittum pattikku murumurp. Here the first two phrases, thinnu, kadichu, end on a relatively higher pitch and the final phrase cadences on a lower pitch by three notes (the distance of a major third), indicating the conclusion of an idea.

A unique concept of rhythm in Syriac chants

The unique application of rhythm in Syriac chants defies our common understanding of rhythm. In the Syriac chant repertory, there are four kinds of rhythm. First, chants that are set to a metronomic in which the melody flows to a regular beat. **‘Brik hannana’**,



Second, chants that follow logogenic rhythm, i.e., the flow of the melody is based on the length of the syllables with pauses at the end of phrases or verses: **Baslos kene dasparlak**. Kalwari malayil kurisinmel.

Third, chants that begin with syllabic rhythm and end with a melisma, Qambel Maran, Etha pus lek. Four, chants that are set to regular metronomic rhythm, but add pauses at the end of semantic units.

I prefer to call this semantic rhythm. Surprisingly, chants in the first category that are set to metronomic rhythm are comparatively rare. More interestingly, the Syriac chants are set to poetic meters that imply the flow of syllables according to a predetermined pattern. For example, **Bas-los-ke-ne/ das-par-lak** (4 + 3 = 7) **Tu-yay-bad-mus / he-so-ka** (4 + 3 = 7). The seven syllables imply seven beats that could simulate a 7/8 rhythm **dhin – na – dhin-na tin-tin- na** (in Hindustani music). However, the rhythm in the melodic realization of these two chants are completely different.

A reasonable question that arises in our minds is that what happens to prose texts that are not set to specific meters? Our forefathers found an ingenious way to address that issue. They came out with the concept of Kyanaya (natural), i. e, a melody that comes naturally to the singer.

Use of Syriac mode in secular songs: Marggam Kali.

The use of certain melodic modes in both liturgical and non-liturgical contexts merits attention.



For example, the wandana ganam in Marggam Kali and several Syriac songs. ‘Bar Maryam’ and ‘Meykkanitha’ share the same melodic mode of a minor tetrachord **Sa Ri Ga Ma Ga Ri Sa**. We

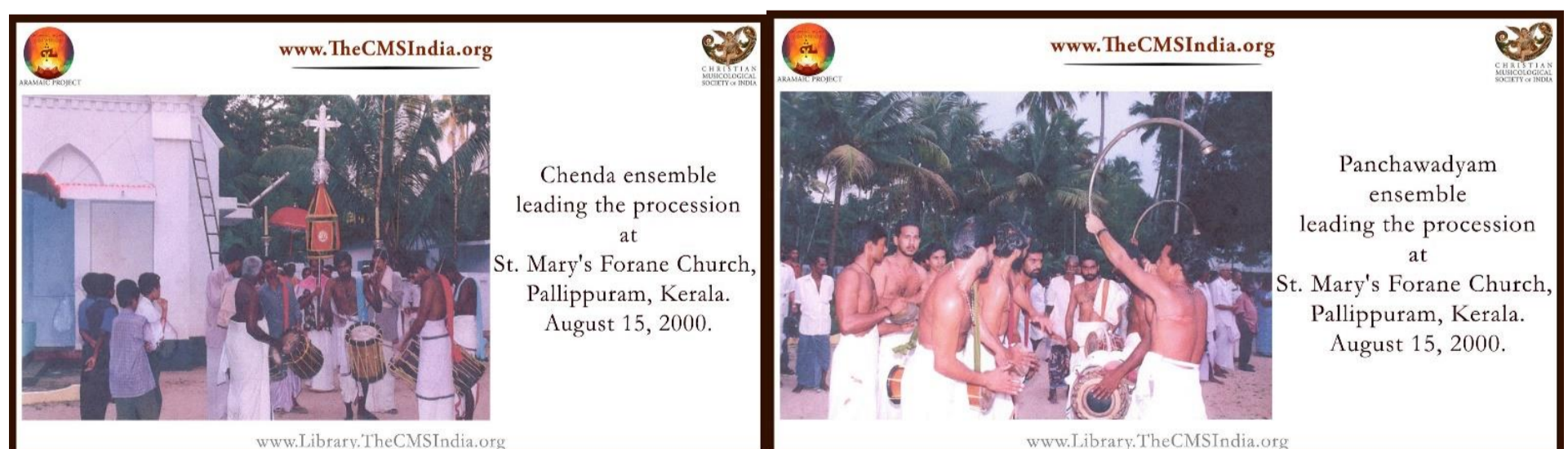
do not know who borrowed from whom. Did the composer of the Syriac melody adapt the local mode, or is it the other way around? We do not know that yet.

Conclusion (Part II)

The St. Thomas Christians in Kerala celebrated their faith through songs. They inherited many of those songs from the East Syriac liturgical tradition. After living and breathing the language and theology for centuries, they found ingenious ways to enhance the meaning of the text. In the process, they happened to create new melodies with a musical grammar and syntax that is different from what we encounter in the established classical music traditions in India or elsewhere in the world. Based on those factors, the Syriac chant repertory deserves attention as a third system of music in India, after Karnatak and Hindustani systems of classical music. The variety of compositional techniques and the unique rhythmic ideas should find a place in music text books in the academia.

PART III

Religious ecumenism and Thoma Marggam: "Hindu" Musicians in Syriac Churches



The photos in Figures 1 & 2 were taken during the annual celebration of the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary at St. Mary's Forane Church at Pallippuram, Kerala, on August 15, 2000. As seen in Figure 1, the chenda ensemble leads the procession, placing itself right in front of the processional Cross

Now let us read a passage from the decrees of the Synod of Udayamperur.

Whereas upon several Festivals of the Church there are Musicians called to the celebration thereof, according to the custom of the Country, who are all *Heathens*, small care being taken in what part of the Church they are placed, or to hinder them from playing during the time of the Holy Sacrifice, at which no Excommunicate Person or Infidel ought to be present, therefore the Synod doth command, that great care be taken not to suffer them to remain in the Church so that they may not behold the holy Sacrament; the Vicar shall also be careful to drive all Heathens who may come upon such occasion, from the Doors and Windows of the Church (trans. by Geddes 1694: 256).

“Por que em muytas festas das Igrejas fam chamados tangedores pera festejarem ao uso da terra, os quaes sempre fam gentios, & ha grãde descuido nos lugares em que os deixão estar, & tanger na Igreja assistindo ao santo Sacrificio da Missa: ao qual nenhum infiel & escomungado pode estar: manda o Synodo que se tenha muito tento em os não deixarem estar depois do Credo, & prêgação, se a ouver, em parte aonde estejam presentes ao sacrificio da Missa, nem veção o Santissimo Sacramento, de que terão cuidado os Vigayros, & assi de deitar os outros gentios que nesse tempo se pozerem às portas ou janellas das Igrejas (Gouvea 1606b, f. 30 r).”

The key phrase here is "According to the customs of the country." In other words, the document is not referring to recent (prior to the Synod) developments among the St. Thomas Christians but a long-standing tradition. The decree poses several points for discussion. For example, it is not clear the "several festivals" for which Hindu musicians were invited to perform. The nature of the musical instruments that the "heathens" played in the Church is unclear. They were probably playing instrumental ensembles such as *panchawadyam* or *chendamelam* associated with festival occasions in Kerala.

It is difficult to determine whether the musicians provided instrumental accompaniment to the Syriac chants or whether they played their music at certain points in the celebration of the mass. Probably, they played before the beginning of the mass, following the indigenous practice of *kelikottu* (literally, "striking to hear") to announce the commencement of a solemn and auspicious event. It is also possible that they played an instrumental prelude or a coda to the Resurrection Hymn (Lord of all, we bow and praise you"), which is sung three times consecutively with great solemnity, during the first part of the mass.

The decree alludes to the presence of the musicians inside the Church after the dismissal rite. Therefore, there must have been a significant reason for the community to allow the presence of Hindu musicians inside the Church during such solemn parts of the liturgy. It may be presumed that the musicians were asked to play at the end of the mass to announce the conclusion of the ceremonies. Until further evidence appears, these ideas will remain mere conjectures.

Conclusion (Part III)

Musical practices of society often reflect the social structure of the time. The Christians' invitation to Hindu musicians to perform inside the Church, especially during mass, and the willingness of the Hindus to accept the invitation tell volumes about the harmonious social interaction between Christians and their Hindu neighbors in Kerala. Such permeability of socio-religious boundaries deeply offended the missionaries. Therefore, the Synod pressured the St. Thomas Christians to redraw the Christian cultural and ritual boundaries within predominantly Hindu society. To cite a few other examples, the Synod forbade Christians from giving Hindu names to their children (session IV, decree XVI), from participating in the local Hindu festival of Onam (session IX, decree IV), and from piercing their ears to wear ornaments like the Hindus (session IX, decree XVII).

Summary

This has been a cursory glance at the Syriac cultural tradition of the St. Thomas Christians in Kerala prior to 1500 AD. In the absence of much material evidence from the period under consideration, we employed a diachronic approach, using documentation from later periods and our recent experience for a roadmap.

In this journey, we had a few limitations. One, our focus has been on the experience of the Syro Malabar Catholics. The critical opinions of members of the other Syriac churches have not been considered. Our assertions may benefit from a fact-check by the members of the other Syriac churches. Their understanding and assessment are equally important.

Second, we have not looked at the history and experiences of Jews in Kerala during this period; both communities have a shared history,



shared customs, and even common melodies. Moreover, both communities enjoyed high social status and upper-caste privileges.

A multidisciplinary approach to Kerala history by linguists, sociologists, archeologists, art historians, and cultural historians may be helpful in corroborating our conclusions. Recent research by such independent scholars as Zacharias Thundy on Sankaracharya, Sabarimala, Mar Thoma Marggam vis a vis Patros Marggam, and Nazrani Brahmin mystery is useful tools to understand better the period under our consideration.

The diachronic study shows that there has been an organic growth of the Syriac tradition, particularly in Kerala, from the early Christian era to the present. This happened despite the challenges the Syriac Christians faced from foreign agencies. There are not many Christian communities in the world that can claim such continuity of history.

For that reason, the study of early Indian Christianity merits more scholarly attention than it has received in the past. A multidisciplinary approach to the study may highlight an organic growth of the original kerygma in the Aramaic language in the multi-religious milieu of South India. The Christian faith came to a land that took pride in housing diverse religious philosophies, ranging from pantheistic to atheistic.



15th Century (?) Statue of Infant Jesus (left) St Mary (right), Catholic Art Museum,

The statues of Infant Jesus and Mary in Buddhist style.

Courtesy: DUX AD HISTORIAM. Fr. Ignatius Payyappilly (2016:192)

Among those philosophies, the early Christians found comfort in the cultural garb of the Buddhist philosophy and engaged in congenial dialogue by accepting Marggam as their frame of reference. Remarkably, they redefined Marggam With

the faith in Jesus, whom St. Thomas the Apostle acknowledged as both God and man at the same time. The divine mantra, Mar Walah, might have been as intimate to the early converts as their life-breath. Interestingly, the Apostle's profession of faith included a hint at the advaita system of thought that was already familiar to the people; later, a son of Kerala,

Shankaracharya, would develop it into a full-fledged system of philosophy. More importantly, the trinitarian idea of God did not lead to a conflict with the belief systems of the land. We see evidence of cooperation rather than conflict among the incoming faith and the local faiths; this is in direct contrast to what happened in the Christian West. All these factors helped Aramaic Christianity to take deeper roots in India. Cooperation rather than confrontation was the winning strategy behind the survival of the Thoma Marggam. In the words of Zacharias Thundy, religious ecumenism was a defining characteristic of the Thoma Marggam, much to the displeasure and bewilderment of the foreign missionaries.

Conclusions

Christianity in India prior to the sixteenth century was a unique phenomenon. India holds a significant place in the Christian geography of early Christianity. Luckily, Aramaic Christianity in the original language of the Kerygma came to India and continues to preserve a few Aramaic elements. All the more important is that the Christian faith moved from west Asia to South Asia before Christianity was defined through the writings of the New Testament books in the Greek language. After reaching India, the Aramaic kerygma took a life of its own by adapting to the prevalent local Buddhist culture. The Buddhist term Marggam for the new faith is testimony to the faith's transformation in South India. More than a set of doctrines, the Jesus movement became a way of life in India. For those reasons, the Aramaic way of thinking can be considered a unique identifying factor of Indian Christianity until 1500.

The striking similarity in the conceptualization of religion as "way" or "way of life" among the followers of the Buddha and Jesus Christ deserves more scholarly attention. Both Buddhism and Christianity emerged from already well-established religions. St. Luke's narrative of the early Christian experience in the Acts of the Apostles presents the emerging new religion as *odos* (Gk., "Way") as in Acts 9: 2; 18: 26; 19: 9, 23; 22: 4; and 24: 14, 22. In Acts 9: 2, Luke refers to the followers of Jesus as "men or women who belonged to the Way." Regarding the Indian context, it is difficult to determine whether the similarity was a mere coincidence or whether it was mediated by St. Thomas the Apostle himself during his evangelization in India.

The prayer vocabulary of the St. Thomas Christians is probably the best testimony to the Aramaic way of thinking. Prayer vocabulary is the common man's encyclopedia of theology. The act of prayer along with accompanying actions are ways of celebrating the theology of a particular Church. For example, to the St. Thomas

Christians, the dogma of Trinity was less critical than the celebratory experience of the Trinity in everyday life.

The veneration of the Cross was an essential component of the Thoma Marggam. The Thoma Christians found ingenious ways to incorporate the veneration of the Cross into their daily life. By giving prime place to the spirituality of the Cross, they celebrated the theology of resurrection.

Although the St. Thomas Christians in Kerala do not own stories of a Christian Sankaracharya or a St. Ephrem, they have access to a proud patrimony of a sacred language, ancient liturgy, unique melodies, musical practices, distinctive religio-cultural conventions that connect them to a glorious past.

The design and execution of Raza, the most solemn form of Qurbana is a testimony to the creative genius of the Syro Malabar clergy. The rituals, melodies, and performance practices of the chants in the Raza are a noteworthy contribution of the Syro Malabar Catholics to the Christian world. It deserves more conversations among Catholic theologians than it has received in the past. Finally, the Syriac language, ancient liturgies, and music are part of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity; they add to the linguistic soundscape and cultural complexity in India. They also tell us the story of the resilience of a people in preserving what is dear to them against adverse circumstances and the zeal with which they passed them on to generations. While appreciating their contributions, the past generations of Christians in Kerala call us to transfer the torch to the next generation and the generation after.

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