



Doctoral dissertation proposal

Submitted to the Dept. of Ethnomusicology
The Graduate Center of the City University of New York
May 24, 1999

THE SYRIAC CHANT TRADITIONS IN SOUTH INDIA

Joseph J. Palackal

The Syriac (Aramaic) liturgy and liturgical chants that originated in the Middle East found their way into South India through immigrant Christians sometime before the fifth century. Continuous contact between the "Syrian Christians" (descendants of Hindu converts and immigrant Christians)¹ in India and the Persian Church kept the chant tradition rejuvenated in the subsequent centuries. Due to divisions and varying ecclesiastical allegiances starting from the sixteenth century, there are now two liturgical and three chant traditions among the Syrian Christians. The Syro-Malabar Church (in union with Rome) and the Church of the East (Diophysite, also known as Nestorian) continue the Chaldean liturgy, which was originally in East Syriac, while the Syrian Orthodox Church (Monophysite, also known as Jacobite) adopted the Antiochene liturgy, which was originally in West Syriac. Although the first two Churches follow the same liturgical tradition with minor variations, their musical repertoires as they exist today are different from each other. As a means of preserving their individual identity, all three Churches retained most of the original Syriac melodies in the process of vernacularizing the liturgies to Malayalam since the 1960s. Thus, the melodies that were once associated with Syriac

¹ The Syrian Christians are also known as "St. Thomas Christians." Tradition has it that St. Thomas the Apostle preached Christianity in South India.



texts of celebrated poets such as St. Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373), Narsai (d.c. 503), and Jacob of Serugh (d. 521) assumed yet another life in a completely different cultural milieu of South India. It is a matter of historical and ethnomusicological interest that the melodies of these chants have not only survived over such a long period of time, but also have retained their unique identity amidst vibrant musical traditions of the Hindus, Muslims, and Jews in South India. Yet, neither the history nor the music of the chants has received adequate attention from musicologists. My purpose is to identify and address the problems and issues in the study of these chant traditions from historical and analytical perspectives.

On a personal note, I was born and raised in Kerala, South India, where I grew up listening to and singing the Syriac chants of the Syro-Malabar Church. Later, I familiarized myself with the chant traditions of the other Syrian Churches. While doing fieldwork in Kerala for my master's thesis², I noticed how singers of *Puthen Pāna*, a Christian musical genre, adapted melodic phrases and stylistic aspects of Syriac chants such as the ornamentation of the ultimate or the penultimate syllable of a word. The discussion of the melodies of *Puthen Pāna* in my thesis includes analysis of a few melodies of the Syriac chants. Thus, my personal experience and knowledge of the Syriac chant traditions give me a vantage point from which to look at the repertoires as a researcher.

I shall divide the dissertation in two parts: part I will contain discussions of historical issues and part II, analytical issues.

² Puthen Pāna : A Musical Study (Hunter College of the City University of New York, 1995).



Part I : Historical issues

In chapter 1, I shall examine the historical processes involved in the introduction of different liturgical and musical traditions at various stages in the history of the Syrian Christians. For this chapter, I shall rely heavily on the published histories of Christianity in India mentioned in the bibliography. I have spent several years studying the history of Christianity and Christian music in India. The first two chapters of my master's thesis contain short surveys of those histories. The knowledge and experience I gained in the process will help me toward a historical overview of the Syriac liturgies and music in South India.

When it comes to the study of the history of chants themselves, one encounters the problem of the dearth of musical documentation in the past. Therefore, the musical history of the chants has to be constructed primarily from contemporary practice by employing both synchronic and diachronic methods. Through interviews with older informants, and reviewing the available published sources such as Saldanha (1937) and Vadakel (1954), I intend to gather information on the state of music before vernacularization of the liturgies (i.e., before the 1960s). My primary concern, however, is to assess the current practice, including individual and regional variations in the singing of the melodies that exist primarily in oral transmission, the singers' perception of and judgment on such variations, and the factors behind the survival of certain melodies and gradual disappearance of certain others.

In chapter 2, I shall explore the survival strategies of the Syrian Christians that helped the preservation of the Syriac chant traditions. One of the reasons for the survival of Syriac chants in South India is the distinction the Christians made between their social identity and their musical identity. Early sixteenth-century accounts of the Portuguese missionaries testify that the Christianity they encountered in South India was a highly indigenized one. The Christians shared



CHRISTIAN
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