

The wedding Songs  
of the  
Cochin Jews  
and of the  
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of  
Kerala:

A Study in Comparison.

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# The wedding Songs of the Cochin Jews and of the Knanite Christians of Kerala:

**A study in Comparison. \***

**Prof: P. M. JUSSAY**

In the many—splendoured wonders of Kerala's population, the critical observer is intrigued by the striking similarities that exist between two small communities—the Cochin Jews and the Knanite Christians. Neither of them is said to be of the soil; but having taken root and flourished for long in this fertile land, they have become indistinguishably integrated with its colours and cantours. The similarities become significant when the Knanites claim Jewish origin.

According to their tradition seventy two families under the leadership of a wealthy syrian merchant migrated to India and settled down at Cranganore during the early centuries of the christian era. This can be construed as a possible cause of the similarities.

It is pointed by similarity—detectors that both communities are endogamous. But this is not particularly strange in a caste-ridden society like the one existing in Kerala. Even today in this aggressively progressive and enlightened age inter—caste marriages are frowned upon. In the case of the Jews, endogamy is a necessity because to marry outside the community is to forsake one's religion. But the Knanite can marry outside the community and still retain his religion. There are in Kerala Catholic and Jacobite communities outside the Knanite group that claim more ancient ancestry than that of the Knanites. They also claim descent from the most elite and blue blooded caste. Still a Knanite Catholic would prefer to marry a Knanite Jacobite and vice versa rather than a non—Knanite co-re-ligionist. This is because of their belief that they are ethnically different from others and do not desire to centaminate their ethnicity by adulterating it with alien blood however aristocratic it may be.

But the most striking similarities are found in their ancient Malayalam wedding songs

The wedding songs of the Knanites have been collected and published by Mr. P. U. Lucas. But the wedding songs of the Jews of Cochin still remain unpublished. Even the existence of these songs is known only to a small circle of scholars.

Of course an enterprising white Jew of Cochin, Dr. A. I. Simon did publish a dozen of these songs in a thin volume. But this did not attract the attention of the scholars because he failed to bring out their historical and social significance. Moreover, his

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interpretation of the songs was rather arbitrary. The first time it was brought to the notice of scholars was when this writer read a paper on the songs in 1978 at XXXIX session of Indian History Congress held at Hyderabad.

It was rather accidental how we came to collect these songs. Prof. Leshnik of Germany, a Jew himself came to know of the study I was conducting about the history, customs and manners of the Jews of Kerala and he introduced me to Mrs. Shirly Isenberg of Jerusalem who was engaged in writing a comprehensive history of this community. During my discussions with the members of the Jewish community I had come to know about these songs but I was told that these songs sung by the women folk had not been written down but transmitted by oral tradition from generation to generation. If however, someone had jotted them down in some note book or other, it must have been taken away when the majority of the Jewish community of Kerala migrated to Israel. So I requested Mrs. Shirly Isenberg to go about burrowing into the abodes of Cochin Jews in Israel for these note books. She went about searching for them and brought out a dozen note books, Xerox copies of which were sent to me. We name them 'S' series after Shirly. A glance at these songs was enough to convince me that it was a valuable find.

Meanwhile during one of her periodical visits to U. S. A., Shirly met Miss Barbara Johnson of the university of Massachusotts who was engaged in preparing her doctoral thesis on "the Jewish women of Cochin". Having been informed by Shirly about the work I was doing, she came to Kerala and unearthed half a dozen books from the Jewish homes in Cochin. These we call the 'B' series. Meanwhile I too had collected a couple of books from North Parur which were named the 'J' series. Thus in all we were able to collect about twenty books of songs.

As can be expected quite a few of these songs are to be found almost every book with minor variations. Still our tally shows that we have now in our possession about 200 separate songs written in the peculiar Malayalam dialect current among the Jews, with a generous admixture of Tamil, Aramaic, Spanish and Yemenite. Later the three of us assembled in Jerusalem and worked in collaboration for about three months translating some of the important songs into English with commentaries.

It was during my stay in Israel that I met Dr. Shalwa Weil who was engaged in critically examining the claim of Knanite about their Jewish origin. We discussed the Knanite songs and compared them with the Jewish songs. Her findings have been published in a pamphlet about a couple of years ago. I also met Rabbi Aviel who generally concurs with the views of Dr. Weil. However it must be mentioned that there are scholars both inside and outside Israel who find it difficult to accept Dr. Weil's conclusions that the Knanites are Judeo-Christians.

Now to return to the Jewish songs. The two hundred odd songs collected, have been divided into five categories viz. historical, bridal, biblical, invocational and miscellaneous. The historical songs deal with some aspect of the community's history. These include the songs about the construction of various Synagogues in Kerala. The bridal songs describe the wedding festivities, invoke God's blessings on the couple or impart instructions to the bride how to be a good Jewish wife. A couple of these songs give

directions to the inexperienced virgin bride how to co-operate with her dearly beloved "in performing the dearly beloved act during the first night." Biblical songs recount the stories from the Bible giving them a local colour. Group of invocational songs contains hymns and prayers to be sung on various occasions. Folk tales and moral instructions of a general nature are included in the miscellaneous category.

The songs of the Knanites can also be grouped very much in the same manner. Apart from this Thematic similarities there are similarities in composition. Most of the songs of the Jews begin by invoking the name of the Almighty. The Knanite songs also follow the method. But it is the linguistic similarities that strike the reader.

The example a peculiar word that is found often used in the Knanite song is Nayan (നായൻ) which means the Lord. The Jewish word is 'Gnayan' (ഞായൻ) which is also as commonly used if not more. The origin of these words is obscure. But what is significant is that this expression is not found in the songs of any other community in Kerala. Here is a list of other words found in the songs of these two communities, which, as far I know, do not occur in any of the songs of other communities whether christian or pagan.

- 1 Alam Chamacha = ആലം ചമച്ച.
- 2 Alam patacha = ആലം പടച്ച.  
= The creator of the universe
- 3 Adiperion = ആദി പെരിയോൻ  
= The Almighty who is from the very begining
- 4 Alaha Nayan = ആലാഹാനായൻ  
(The Lord God)
- 5 Adiperia Nayan thane 'ekalarulale  
= ആദിപെരിയനായൻ തന്റെ ഏകലക്ഷ്മാലൈ  
= At the command of the Almighty.
- 6 Onnaya Nayan = (ഒന്നായനായൻ)  
= The one true God.
- 7 Vazhutaya Nayan = (വാഴുടയനായൻ)  
= The Lord of life
- 8 Thampuran Mumbake = തമ്പുരാൻ മുമ്പാകെ  
= In the sight of the Lord.
- 9 Alaha Nayan than Thunayale' (ആലാഹാനായൻ തൻ തുണയാലൈ)  
= by the grace of Lord God
- 10 Tharuthaikkal (തരതാക്കൾ) = the elders
- 11 Thasiyote' (താശിയോടെ) = with joy
- 12 Varughese (വറുഗീസു) The Jewish version is Bareed or Vareed which is a corrupt form of Brit Mila which means any good religious act — and it is generally used for circumcision.
- 13 Mesri (മെസ്രി) Egypt
- 14 Bava = (ബാവ) = The Jewish version is Vava = Father. These words

Malayala Bible

and expressions occur so often in either group of songs that one cannot but feel that they are taken from a common source.

The Jewish copper plates kept in the Paradesi synagogue at Mattancherry show that Bhaskara Ravi Varma, the Cherman Perumal, granted seventy two princely privileges to Joseph Rabban, the Jewish merchant of Cranganore. According to Knanite tradition Thomas of Kana too was granted similar privileges when he landed at Cranganore. Therefore references to these privileges are found abundantly in the songs of both communities. They are pakalvilakku (പകൽ വിളക്കു) day lamp, pavada (പാവട) carpet, Kombu (കൊമ്പു) blowing of trumpet, Kottu (കൊട്ടു) drum beating and kurava (കുരവ) ululation.

In the discription of the bridal procession there are two lines in the Christian song which are also found in the Jewish description of Joseph Rabban's royal procession

പൊന്നും മെതിയടിമേൽ മെല്ലെ മെല്ലെ അവരൂ നടന്നു  
 വെള്ളി മെതിയടിമേൽ മെല്ലെ മെല്ലെ അവരൂ നടന്നു.

is the description in the christian song while the Jewish song says:-

പൊന്നും മെതിയടിമേൽ മെല്ലെ നടന്നാൻ, ചിരിയാനന്ദൻ,  
 വെള്ളി മെതിയടിമേൽ മെല്ലെ നടന്നാൻ, ചിരിയാനന്ദൻ.

"Chirianandan" is the title given to Joseph Rabban by the Jews which may mean 'the joy of Syria' or the 'Song of Syria' and it was a custom to bestow this title on the bridegroom.

Besides these, there are a number of other linguistic similarities. These similarities are not accidental and cannot be easily explained away. But the most baffling is the existence of a couple of songs that are identical. One of them is "Vazhvu Pattu". This song is very popular both among the Jews and the Kananites.

The first line of the Jewish song is:-

വാഴ്വന്ന വാഴ്വു നിനക്കായിരിക്ക  
 (Let thine be the blessed life)

Whereas in the Christian song it is:

(വാഴ്വെന്ന വാഴ്വു നിനക്കൊകെ തന്നേൻ)  
 Life blessed I have bestowed on thee.

The next two lines pose a problem: This is the Jewish version:-

മക്കളും ശലോം പെരതായിരിക്ക  
 വാഴുക തങ്കയ പെരാന ഭൂമിൻ.

(Large be thy number of thy children and peace great. Thus let thee live in the world unaffected by distress) But the Christian version takes a different form:-

നീയും നിൻ ഭർത്താവും മക്കളും കൂടെ  
 കാലം പെരതായ് വാണിട്ടിരിക്കേണം.

(with thy husband and Children let thee live for long). Examining these two versions one cannot but feel the lines in the Christian song are different in tone, style and nature from the earlier line and that they are too modern to become an integral part of the song. Therefore the conclusion is inevitable that they are later interpolation.

The next two lines:-

വാഴ്വാനാം ഭൂമി ഫലമാകെ തന്നേൻ  
 പങ്കിട്ടു നിൻ മക്കൾ കൊള്ളുക ചെന്നേകി.

(The earth and all its fruits were granted to thee and to thy children to share). The first of these lines is missing from in the Jewish song. It must have been dropped during the oral transmission. For it is complementary to the second line.

Thus barring a few lines and expressions the Vazhvu Pattu of Cochin Jews and of the Knanite Christian is substantially the same.

There is one another song which is found in both collections. It is not the whole song that is identical but the first half a dozen lines, after which each takes its own separate course.

The first line is almost identical:-

പൊന്നാണത്തിട്ടും തണ്ടുകലേറി  
 മംഗല വേല കാണാൻ.

(He comes in gold decorated palanquin  
 To witness the wedding festivities)

The next four lines are found missing from the Christian Version:-

പൊന്നോരുമാല മാർവിലും പൊന്നും  
 പൂശാരി മത്തൽ മീതെ  
 മന്നവൻ ഏകൻ പൊയിതൂയിലാടും  
 പട്ടണി പൂണ്ടു നല്ല.

(with gold chain in the chest and gold glittered canopy above  
 A king clad clad in golden fluttering silk.)

The next two lines are almost identical.

വളർകൊടി മുനീൽ മുത്തണിത്തോനെ  
 വട്ടകം വീശുമിതെ.

(The noble standard in front and the diamond studded alavattom swaying) There is some difference with regard to the next line: The Jewish version is as follows:-

മുനണി പിന്നിലകമ്പടി നായരും

വെളയാട്ടും പാട്ടും.

(Retinue of Nair soldiers in front and rear with dance and song) ✓

The Christian version is:-

പിന്നണി മുനിലകമ്പടി നായൻ

നിൻ വിളയാട്ടും പാട്ടും.

These lines are quite unintelligible and this is because of the change effected at a later date.

Examining both these versions one feels that the Jewish version is the original one and that the Christian version has undergone changes which have marred its pristine beauty. Moreover the Jewish version is based on a legend that one of the ancient kings of Kerala came to witness the festivities of a Jewish wedding.

There are indications that other legends of the Jews are also shared by the Knanites. For examples in the song entitled

“ഇന്നു നീ ഞങ്ങളെ” .....

we find the following:

കൊള്ളവച്ചു നായൻകൂടി  
പട്ടണത്തിൽ പുകക്കാറെ  
കൊള്ളിവച്ചു പള്ളിയഴിച്ചു നൂ ചുട്ടുപട്ടണം  
വെട്ടിമരിച്ചു നൂ മുവർ കൊററവർ  
നല്ല മന്നവർ

(The Nair soldiers entering the city plundered it  
They set fire to the church and burnt down the city  
While three good Kings bravely fought and fell.

This is undoubtedly based on the Jewish legend that their glorious synagogue at Cranganore was burnt down by the soldiers of Zamaria who mounted an attack on the city under the cover of night.

Just as three Kings are mentioned in these lines, one of the Jewish songs also makes mention of three Kings in Cranganore taking part in a royal procession:-

മുന്നാണമൊണ്ടു, മുൻതാളമൊണ്ടു  
മുവര രാശാക്കര ആരാതരപെററു.

(Three elephants in front and with beating of Cymbals  
Three Kings bestowed with grace)

Who are these three kings? It is a fact attested by historical records that Joseph Rabban, the Jewish merchant, was installed a prince by Cheraman Perumal. Likewise Thomas of Cane is said to have been made a prince when he landed at Cranganore by the sovereign of the land. So it is not possible that when Zamarians' forces attacked the city the successors of these three Kings-the Cheraman Perumal, the Jewish and the Christian Princes-fought bravely to save the city.

The songs about synagogues and Churches follow a set pattern. First a few lines of invocation. This is followed by a description of how the place of worship came to be constructed. After obtaining the local rulers' permission the leaders of the community go about fixing the site of the building. Masons then set to work. When masonry is completed the local ruler permits the leaders of the community to take from his forests the timber required for the building. When it is completed there is great jubilation among the people. In some cases the local ruler promises to supply the oil required for the Ramps in the place of worship from the palace store. But many of the Christian songs are modern and hence they do not follow the ancient pattern.

Similarities are also found in the way biblical stories are treated in the songs. One of the stories that appears in both the groups is the story of Joseph. Jews have great respect for this hero of the Old Testament as he is an ideal son, an ideal father and an ideal ruler. This feeling is shared by the Kananites who claim Jewish origin, and that is why the story of Joseph is popular with them.

The similarities do not end here. The Jews as well as Kananites give local colour to the stories of the Bible. A fine example of them is the song about Tobias in the Christian collection. In the description of the wedding of Tobias we find all the Paraphernalia of a Christian wedding of Kerala. Look at the plethora of things spread in the wedding pandal :

വെറിലത്തട്ടങ്ങൾ ചന്ദന പാത്രങ്ങൾ  
 എണ്ണ വെളിച്ചെണ്ണ ചുണ്ണമ്പു കുറിയും  
 ആട്ടുന്ന കല്ലുകല്ലും തിരികല്ലും  
 അറമില്ലാതെയരകല്ലുകലയും.....

✓ In the Jewish song that describes the story of Joseph, it is said that Joseph after revealing himself to his brothers sends a decorated bullock cart to bring his 'Vava' to the palace. Likewise when Ruth goes to meet Boaz her lover, she is washed, well groomed and clad in white exactly like a malayalee girl :

In this way the Jews and the Kananites make the stories of the Bible not something of far away and long ago but of the immediate present and of the neighbourhood.

These and a number of other similarities indicate the possibility of the Kerala Jews and Kananite Christians living in close contact with each other and sharing legends and tradition from a common repository.

Here I would like to deviate a bit and discuss the origin of the appellation "Thekkumbhagom" by which the Kananites are known.

According to Tradition St. Thomas the Apostle came to Cranganore to preach the gospel. He was prompted to undertake this journey because of the presence of a large community of Jews in this world-famous trading centre. He announced to them the glad tidings that the Messiah whom they were expecting with expectation from generation to generation had actually appeared in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

According to tradition the Jews had four colonies in and around cranganore. One was at Palayur (Paloor to the Jews) a few miles to the north of Cranganore, which was a busy trading centre as evidenced by the thirteenth century Malayalam poem "Koka Sandesh". Even though no vestige of this colony is left, place names like 'Jew Street' and 'Jews Hill' still persist in the place corroborating the ancient tradition. Another colony was at pulloot a little to north of the Kali Temple at Cranganore. There was one colony at Methala on the mouth of the river Periyar on the northern side. We have a disused pond in this place which is still called "Joothakulam". Yet another colony was at ~~Maliankara~~ on the South bank of the river at the mouth of the harbour. ~~It was here that St. Thomas is said to have landed.~~

As it happened in Jerusalem quite a few of the Jews of Cranganore must have accepted the gospel and became followers of Jesus and they must have been the earliest Christians of Kerala. It is possible that this first colony of Jude Christians was at Pulloot which is to the north of Charaman Perumal's palace. We have a tradition in our family that our ancestors came from Pulloot and settled down at Chandamangalam during Zamerin's invasion of Cranganore.

The palace of Charaman Perumal stood at site called today "~~Cheraman Parambu~~" on the Kottappuram-Cranganore high way, very near the ancient Church at Kottappuram. On the southern side of Cheraman Parambu by the riverside we can see the ruins of the fort, the portugese built. ~~Very near this fort there is a memorial on which it is inscribed that the mortal remains of Thomas of Cana and of Mar Joseph are resting in this hallowed~~



spot. This spot is to the south of Cheraman Parambu. It is also near the riverside. To distinguish between these two groups of Judeo Christians, those who resided in Pulloot on the northern side of the palace, were known as Vadakkumbhagom while those who came later and settled on the Southern side of the palace were called the Thekkumbhagom. They were also called 'Kadavumbhagom' as their colony was near the river side. But after their migration to the interior parts of Kerala as a result of 'Zamorians' and Tippu's attacks on the city, only the name of Thekkumbhagom is retained. Since both the groups were of Jewish origin and were from ancient Syria, it is natural for them to maintain intimate contacts with each other and that I think, is the reason for the similarities we find in their folk songs and traditions. There is a song in the Jewish collection which goes to prove this possibility. We call it the "Dispute". It describes a dispute between two groups of people living around the "Mukkal vattom", or the Temple. ie; to its north and south. The Jews formed one group, and the other group is described as Thekkumbhagom or Kadavumbhagom.

The cause of the dispute was that the collections (കെട്ടുപണം) for the maintenance of a place of worship from the market sector (പാണ്ടിക ഭാഗം) they from the river side കടവു ഭാഗം carried away. Hence among them they quarrelled, sons and nephews in crowds gathered and so complaining they went to the august presence of Cheraman Perumal.

(മക്കമരമക്ക കൂട്ടം കൂടി  
അന്യായത്തികൾ ചെന്നു  
ചേരമാൻ പെരുമാൾ പക്കം.)

The Cheraman Perumal reminded them of the days of Yore when under Chiriandan they lived in amity and concord and advised them to continue that life of co-operation and friendship.

The Thekkumbhagom accepted their guilt, but those of the market sector were generous and declared.

"Through you no harm has come to us.

Not for misdeeds are the Thekkumbhagom. The song indicates that the collections taken away were used for building a place of worship for themselves. Therefore the other group Says:

'പള്ളികൊണ്ടാരും പിണങ്ങരുതു.'

On account of Palli none should quarrel

For Palli is indeed the source and home for both.

From this it can be surmised that the Judeo Christians of Pulloot and the Knanites were living together for a time and shared the same place of worship till the Thekkumbhagom built a place of worship for themselves.

There is a tradition among the Jews that some among ancient settlers who are called the Black Jews, wanted to marry the daughters of the white Jews who were late comers. When they refused the groups fell apart and began to mount bitter attacks on each other. One would not be surprised if a similar development took place among the two groups of Christians. The Thekkumbhagam wanted to keep their ethnicity and refused to enter into marital relations with the Vadakkumbhagom. To counter the claim of the Thekkumbhagom about their Jewish origin, the Vadakkumbhagom invented the absurd story of Namboodiris being converted by St. Thomas when Namboodiries were unknown in Kerala. Thus the two Christian communities fell apart each claiming to be superior to the other forgetting that to be the children of God is infinitely nobler than being the children of Jews or of Namboodiries.



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