THE SYRIAC HERITAGE OF THE SYRO MALABAR CHURCH: AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT OF THE CULTURAL FABRIC OF INDIA

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Abstract: The Syriac heritage of the Syro Malabar Church is an integral part of the cultural treasures of India and the world. The Syro Malabar Church (about 4 million members) is the largest among the eight churches of the St. Thomas Christians, who were evangelized by the missionary endeavors of the Aramaic-speaking Apostle Thomas. From early on, the Aramaic (Syriac) language and music played a significant role in the experience of the Christian faith in India. In spite of the challenges from Portuguese missionaries in the sixteenth century, the Syro Malabar Christians zealously cherished and preserved the Syriac tradition. In the following centuries, they also adapted many liturgical practices from the Roman rite by translating the respective Latin texts into Syriac, and composing them anew in Kerala, thereby adding another layer to the already vast Syriac chant repertory. With the vernacularization of the liturgy in the 1960s, however, intimacy with the Syriac tradition declined gradually. Luckily, the generation that was born during the transitional period continues to hold, albeit advancing in years, a prolific memory base of melodies and experiences associated with the Syriac tradition. With a focus on the musical and liturgical elements, this article provides an overview of the various aspects of the Syriac heritage, practical suggestions to preserve it for posterity, and recommendations to include it in our conversations on the cultural legacy of India.

Introduction

On Wednesday, June 16, 2014, The New York Times carried the following news item by its staff reporter, Ellen Barry, on the first page of the International section: "New Leaders Stir Hopes for Sanskrit in India." The team of administrators, under the leadership of the new Prime Minister Narendra Modi, were making plans to promote the study of the Sanskrit language. "In late May," the article said, "there had been rumors that he [the Prime Minister] would go a step further and take his oath of office in Sanskrit." Amid a hectic election campaign, Mr. Narendra Modi's team spent time deliberating on how to draw attention to the Sanskrit language as a means to reclaim a particular aspect of the history of India and its cultural legacy. Even though the new Prime Minister changed his mind at the last minute and took his oath in Hindi, the very idea of doing it in Sanskrit was a bold and calculated move. Today, we may engage in a similar pursuit. We may deliberate on the unique religious and cultural heritage of the Syro Malabar Christians. One of the determining factors of Kerala Christian heritage belongs with the Aramaic language in which Jesus and his disciples preached the gospel. In other words, the St. Thomas Christians in India claim to have received the good news well before the original teachings of Jesus were translated into the medium of the Greek language, and were bequeathed to the world by the four Gospel writers. We can also be uniquely proud of the fact that the Christian faith came to India, where

the Aramaic language was already in use for several centuries; Aramaic was one of the languages in which Emperor Ashoka (ca. 269-232 BC) promulgated his edicts (see Mukherjee, 1984). Therefore, it is worthwhile to reset the discourse on India from a Syriac perspective.

Syriac Christianity in Kerala

The spice trade between Kerala and the Middle East, established much before the Christian era, paved the way for the import of the Eastern form of Christianity to South India. According to tradition, St. Thomas, one of the twelve Apostles of Jesus preached the Christian faith in South India. In the fourth century, a group of Christians from Persia migrated to Kerala; they brought the liturgy in Syriac, a form of Aramaic that Jesus and his disciples spoke. Continued commercial and religious interactions between the two regions helped the preservation of the linguistic and musical traditions associated with the Chaldean/Syriac Christianity from the Middle East, as if in a time capsule, in Kerala.

At the dawn of the sixteenth century, Vasco de Gama brought Portuguese missionaries to Kerala; they introduced the Roman Catholic form of Christianity along with liturgy in Latin. The missionaries converted many local people into the Roman Catholic faith. The Latin Church flourished in Kerala through the zealous activities of the Franciscans, Jesuits, and Carmelites. In their zeal for uniformity, the Portuguese missionaries made an attempt to change the Syriac language and music of the St. Thomas Christians to Latin language and Western chant. However, the St. Thomas Christians considered the Syriac language and music to be crucial to their unique religious identity and, therefore, resisted the move. In 1653, a group of St. Thomas Christians revolted against the Portuguese missionaries who wanted to take complete control over the religious and social lives of the local Christians. These Christians gathered at the church in Mattanchery, near Kochi, and took an oath that they would never subject themselves to the Jesuit Archbishop Garcia. Later, they contacted the Patriarch of Antioch to send them bishops. The bishops who came to Kerala gradually introduced the Antiochene liturgy in West Syriac (different from the East Syriac of the Chaldean rite).

All these encounters led to several divisions among the St. Thomas Christians. Today, the term "St. Thomas Christians" or "Syriac Christians" refer to a conglomeration of eight different churches: Syro Malabar Church, Church of the East, Malankara Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite) Church, Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, Syro Malankara Church, Mar Thoma Syrian Church, Malabar Independent Syrian Church, and St. Thomas Evangelical Church. Among these, the Syro Malabar Church and the Church of the East followed the Chaldean liturgical tradition in the East-Syriac form of the Aramaic language, and the other churches followed the Antiochene tradition in West Syriac. At present, these churches celebrate their respective liturgies mostly in the vernacular languages.

The outstanding Oxford scholar Sebastian Brock has underscored the importance of the Syriac heritage as a "third lung," along with the "two lungs" (the Latin West and the Greek East) of the Church made famous by Pope John Paul II (Brock 2005 & 2008). Our focus here is on the Syriac heritage of the Syro Malabar Church. We shall use the term "Syriac heritage" to mean a broad spectrum of items that include the different aspects of the Syriac language, liturgy, theology,

music, poetry by West Asian poets, as well as such Indian poets as Alexander the Indian (Fr. Chandy Kadavil, 1588-1677) and Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara (1805-1871), prosody, performance practices and rhythmic cadences that are unique to the Syriac tradition; more importantly, the Syriac heritage also implies, in the words of Fr. Charles Pyngott, C. M. I., the "Aramaic way of thinking." Obviously, we shall discuss here only a few of these items briefly. Our goal is to increase awareness and appreciation for the unique cultural heritage of Kerala, to discuss ways and means to preserve it for posterity, and to add it to the broader conversation on the wonder that is India.

The Aramaic Project

With the above mentioned goals in mind, the Christian Musicological Society of India (www.The CMSIndia.org) embarked on the Aramaic Project, in 2012.[1] In the ensuing years, through the concerted efforts of several individuals, the Society has collected a vast body of information through recordings of performances and interviews of resource persons in the Syro Malabar communities in Kerala and abroad. Remarkably, the resource persons include not only priests and bishops, but also ordinary people, who are often sidetracked by official church historians. The recordings are posted with liner notes on the web site of the Project. The web site will also serve future scholars for a comparative study of the history of the Aramaic language and music in the Middle East and India. Besides, the archive is a current witness to the status of this Semitic language in contemporary India. The Project is also a proactive step toward passing the tradition to the present generation. Even if that attempt fails, the archive will remain as the final chapter in the centuries-long history of a language lying on its deathbed. At this juncture, it is not difficult to envision a future Kerala, where the sound of the East Syriac language is a nonentity. Appallingly, most of the members of clergy as well as the hierarchy of the Syro Malabar Church seem to be already reconciled with that possibility. Using sharp-edged swords of sheer negligence, they are shredding the over-two-thousand-years long umbilical cord that connects the Sunday Eucharistic tables in their churches to the Passover meal in the Upper Room in Jerusalem that St. Thomas the Apostle partook of.

The Aramaic Project is only a small part of the larger project of creating a digital library of Christian music in India. Christianity in India has interacted with the cultural milieu of the country and has assumed an identity of its own, unlike anywhere else in the world. This unique identity is evident in the various styles of music and lyrics in multiple languages in different parts of India. The ultimate goal of the Christian Musicological Society of India is to collect as many samples as possible and make them available to scholars for further research. These materials are a goldmine for researchers on Indian culture, because they are a testimony to the cultural synthesis that has happened in India over the centuries.

My advantages and disadvantages as a researcher

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[1] See http://christianmusicologicalsocietyofindia.com/aramaic-project. Accessed on November 11, 2019.

In reference to the Syriac tradition, I consider myself lucky for several reasons. I happen to belong to what may be characterized as the transitional generation that grew up in Kerala between the 1950s and the 1970s. This was the time of transition of the Syro Malabar liturgy from Syriac to the vernacular. The transitional generation continues to hold memories of the sounds and sentiments of the Syriac language and liturgy.

I also feel lucky to have been born into the family of a great teacher of the Syriac language and liturgy, namely, the saintly Palackal Thoma Malpan (circa 1780-1841), the oldest of the three founding fathers of the religious congregation that I belong to: the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate. I am also lucky to have been born at Pallippuram, the home of the first indigenous seminary (as we understand that term today) of the St. Thomas Christians that Palackal Thoma Malpan founded. It was at Pallippuram Seminary that the Malpan groomed his protégé, his adopted son, Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara, to be an erudite and zealous priest and future collaborator in founding the first indigenous religious congregation for men in India. Interestingly, the Prior General of this Congregation continues to print its motto in the Syriac language, in the Syriac script, on his official letterhead: *Metan ṭennēs lmāryâ'alāhâ ḥayltānâ* (I Kings 19:10), "I have been very zealous for the Lord Yahweh, the Mighty God."

At baptism, I was given the name Ouseph, the Kerala adaptation of the Hebrew/Aramaic name, Yawsep. I started active participation in the Syriac liturgy as an altar boy. The liturgical texts were printed in the Malayalam script. Although our generation did not fully understand the meaning of the text, the Syriac melodies were an important part of our religious experience. I made my singing debut in Syriac at the age of nine, with the Syriac chant *B'ēda d'yāwmān* ("On this festival day") for the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, at my local parish at Pallippuram.

There are a few caveats, however. I am not a scholar of the Syriac language, Syro Malabar liturgy, or Indian church history. My approach to these branches of scholarship has been through music. My authorial voice comes from the knowledge I gained during the researches for my master's thesis on the singing styles of *Puthen Pāna* (1995), and my doctoral dissertation on the Syriac chant traditions in South India (2005) at the City University of New York. I needed to situate the melodies and their performance practices in the larger context of the Syro Malabar liturgy. Soon after I completed my doctoral studies, the Syro Malabar Diocese of Chicago asked me, on behalf of the Syro Malabar Synod, to set the English version of *Qurbānâ* to music. This gave me another opportunity to revisit all that I learned earlier to compose melodies that are appropriate for each segment in the liturgy (Palackal 2007). Twenty-five years of my geographical distance from the Syriac setting in Kerala was a mixed blessing. On the one hand, I was removed from the emotionally laden liturgical controversies that were going on in Kerala. On the other hand, those years also provided me with an intellectual intimacy with the tradition that I am emotionally involved with.

Text and music: two different approaches

Let us begin with some good news. In 1957 the Holy See approved and promulgated the restored Syriac text of the Syro Malabar *Qurbānā*. The Syro Malabar Bishops' Conference promulgated the Malayalam translation of this text on July 3, 1962. By that time, Syriac literacy had declined considerably among the laity. Interestingly, during the process of translating the Syriac liturgy into the vernacular, the translators showed greater concern in transferring the Syriac melodies (i. e., melodies that originated with the Syriac texts) as accurately as possible to the new medium than in transposing the original meaning of the song texts. The translators masterfully adjusted the Malayalam text to the melody of the Syriac text. Given below are examples from three chants, with the Syriac text and their Malayalam translations. The translations are by Fr. Abel Periyappuram, C. M. I. (1920-2001).

Example 1

Syriac text	Malayalam text
Ṭū ʿyay badmūt heśōkâ	Pulariyil nidrayuṇarnnange
Prīsâ ħwāt al beryātâ	Pāwana sannidhiyaṇayunnu
Wadnaḥ nuhrē(h) damśīḥâ	Kaṛthāwe nin karuṇakkāy
Waqnâ ʿalmā būyānâ.	Nandi paranju namikkunnu

Example 2.

Syriac text	Malayalam text
Ethpan al slōtha dawdayk pārōqan	Narakula rakshakanām miśihā kaṛthāwe
W'qambel bāwūthan w'pannā śelāthan.	Njangaḷaṇachiṭumī pṛāṛthana kēḷkkaṇame.

Example 3.

Syriac text	Malayalam text
B'ēdâ dyāwmān negdōl klīlā	Athimōhanamī thirunāḷ pṛabhayil
Dazmīrātâ ʿīqār maryam	Mudamōlunnu kanyā maṛiyam

In spite of the considerable disparity in the number of syllables in each verse in the Syriac and Malayalam versions, the melody is almost the same. The melodies that originated in the Semitic context of West Asia were "married" to texts that were born in the Dravidian-Sanskrit context in South India. In this process, Syriac melodies received greater prominence as identity markers, in comparison with the perceived sacredness of the Syriac language, as well as the thematic contents of the texts. Moreover, the decision to retain the Syriac melodies was beneficial to the religious music repertory of India. If the Syro Malabar Church had not taken that path, those melodies would have suffered the same fate of the so-called Gregorian Chant in the Roman Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council.

Use the Syriac text as a reference point

Now, let us turn to some not-so-good news. Forty-two years after the Syriac liturgy was translated into Malayalam, we are still struggling to transfer the Aramaic way of thinking into the vernacular. This requires the transference of ideas and concepts that originated in the cultural context of a particular people in West Asia to the people who went through a different history in South India. Therefore, it is time to delve deep into the roots of the problem of transferring a way of thinking, as opposed to translating words from one language to another, from one cultural setting to another.

Let us examine a few words in the prayer vocabulary of the Syro Malabar Catholics. The prayer vocabulary is the common man's encyclopedia of theology. What I am attempting in the next few pages is to show how we have failed to transfer the Aramaic way of thinking into the vernacular. To do so, I shall highlight certain Syriac words and expressions that were disregarded during the process of translating the liturgical texts. I am going to take examples from the Malayalam and English versions of *Qurbānā*. I am not familiar with the versions in the other languages like Hindi. I would like to argue in favor of adopting some of those words and terms into the vernacular.

In every language there are words that define themselves by their sounds, i. e., the sound of the word itself is its meaning. Such words emerge out of the corporate wisdom of the speakers of a language accumulated over an extended period of time. Usually, these words are understood in exactly the same way by all the speakers of the language. The most familiar example from India is the Sanskrit term, *śānthi*. The very utterance of the word creates the effect and the affect. It is understood by the listener instantly; interpretations are unnecessary. One such example from the Aramaic lexicon is the word *ruḥ*, which literally means "breath." The utterance of this word requires a special use of air and energy that explicates the meaning. *Ruḥ* is pre-language, even pre-word; it is pre-OM. It is the raw material with which words and meanings are constructed. In the beginning was the *ruḥ*, *ruḥ* was with God, *ruḥ* was God. Our Proto-Dravidian or Tamil-speaking forefathers in Kerala adopted the word into their prayer vocabulary. Even after Syriac literacy declined considerably, they retained this word. Our parents' generation recited the minor doxology as *Bāwākkum puthṛanum* ***ruhādaqqudiśāykkum*** *sthuthiyāyrikkaṭṭe*. They did not try to translate *ruhā* into Tamil (or, if they did, we do not know about it). In the 1960s, however, the word *ruh* was translated as *ātmāw* (meaning, "soul," that which sustains life) or *arūpi* ("that which is formless"). Thus, currently, we say the minor doxology as *Pithāwinum puthṛanum* ***pariśudhātmāwinum*** *sthuthi*. Both words, *ātmāw* and *arūpi* are insufficient to convey the original sense of the word *ruḥ* or *rūhâ*; both words lack the magic that comes from the combination of sound and sense. The first, *ātmāw*, is a synonym, the second, *arūpi*, is a derivative. One might wonder whether our forefathers were smarter than our generation.

An example from the lyrics of a Malayalam movie song by a famous poet might support this argument. Shri Vayalar Rama Varma (1928-1975) wrote a Christian prayer song for the film, *Makane Ninakkuwēnṭi*. The song starts with the minor doxology, Glory be to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The song starts thus: *Bāwākkum puthranum pariśudha ruhāykkum sthuthiyāyirikkatte, eppōzhum sthuthiyāyirikkatte*. Mr. G. Devarajan (1924-2006) composed the

melody, which was recorded in the voice of the popular playback singer, P. Susheela. Shri Vayalar, a Hindu, was well versed in the Christian folklore of Kerala. The film was released in 1971, nine years after the Syro Malabar Church translated the liturgy into Malayalam. The minor doxology, by that time, was already on the lips of every Catholic in Kerala as *Pitāwinum puthranum pariśudhātmāwinum sthuthi*. Instead of following the popular version, Shri Vayalar decided to retain the Aramaic word *rūḥâ*. Both words *pariśudhātmāw* and *pariśudhārūpi* would have been a perfect fit to the melody. Vayalar knew, however, that both *ātmāw* and *arūpi* had accumulated different connotations, and might detract the listeners from the sense of the original Aramaic word *rūḥâ*. He knew that words carried not only particular meanings, but also collective memories of the speakers of the language. In retrospect, one can only appreciate the wisdom of Shri Vayalar Rama Varma.

Let us examine another famous Syriac word that lost currency after the translation of the Syriac liturgy into Malayalam. That word is *ślāmâ* ("Shalom" in Hebrew). *Ślāmâ* defies easy translation into another language. It is usually translated into Malayalam as *samādhānam*, and in English as "peace." Both *samādhānam* and peace, however, are insufficient to convey the complex meaning of *ślāmâ*. The Indian equivalent to *ślāmâ* would be *śānthi*. Both *ślāmâ* and *śānthi* are culture specific, yet convey almost the same meaning. The word *ślāmâ* has practically disappeared from the prayer vocabulary of the Syro Malabar Church. The difficulty in translating the word into Malayalam is most evident in the Malayalam version of the famous Syriac chant *E'dtā pūs lēk baślāmâ* that used to be sung during the funeral of priests. The key phrase in this dramatic song is *ślāmâ*. The deceased priest and those attending the funeral enter into a dialogue by bidding farewell to each other by using the word *ślāmâ*. The deceased priest bids farewell to the Church, the altar of sacrifice, his fellow priests, his students (if he were a *Malpān*), and the people. The congregation, in return, bids the deceased priest farewell with *ślāmâ*. Fr. Abel Periyappuram, C. M. I. and Fr. Ludovic Kunianthodath, C. M. I. (1888-1979) prepared the current Malayalam version. The Malayalam version that they came up with is conspicuous by the absence of the most important theme in the original chant: bidding *ślāmma*. It is obvious that Fr. Abel's concern was to maintain the original melody. Accordingly, he replaced *ślāmâ* with the phrase *witawāngunnēn* ("May I bid farewell"); the melody sounds wonderful. What we lost in the process were the sound, the sensibility, and the meaning of *ślāmâ*.

The Syriac word *barēk* is yet another example of a culture-specific word that defies translation. The English missal (*thaksā*) uses "blessing" (from the Latin *benedicere*, meaning, "speak well") as an equivalent to *barēk*. In the Malayalam *thaksā*, we have different translations, depending on the context. In the Institution narrative, for example, we use the past tense of the verb *wāzhthuka*: *appametuthu .... wāzhthi* ("took bread …. blessed"). The manner in which the verb is used here gives the wrong indication that Jesus blessed the bread, instead of saying the prayer of blessing God. On other occasions, *barēk* is translated as *anugraham*, as in *kaṛthāwe anugrahikkēṇame* ("Bless [me] O Lord"). The Malayalam and English translations of *barēk* are insufficient, and sometimes even misleading, to communicate the complex semantic structure of the word that accumulated several layers of meanings through its use in varied contexts in the Bible.

The inherent musicality of the Syriac syntax is yet another reason why we should go back to the source of our liturgy as a reference point. The Syriac syntax has an uncanny power to juxtapose simple words to create layers of meanings. Very often, such combinations of words defy an easy rendering into other languages. Consider, for example, the phrase "*barēk mār*" that appears many times in the liturgy. The phrase is translated in Malayalam as "kar-thā-wē a-nu-gra-hi-kkē-ṇa-me." The Malayalam translation consists of ten syllables, and is less musically viable in comparison with the Syriac phrase, which has only three syllables. The Syriac phrase lends itself to repetition without creating boredom. In the Syriac *Qurbānâ*, this phrase used to be repeated three times in a row, as in: *barēk mār*, *barēk mār, barēk mār*. The Malayalam thaksā, however, requires to say this phrase only once (repetition is not required). The reason, one can easily surmise, is that such a repetition might create boredom because of the lack of musical viability.

In every language, there are words or phrases that mean more than they sound. These words, or combination of words, acquire multiple meanings over an extended period of time. This happens when people in different regions use the same word or phrase to mean different things. Consequently, words become repositories of the collective memories of the speakers.
A familiar example in India for a polysemic (with multiple meanings) word is *rāgam*/*rāg*/*rāga*. The word literally means color, but is rarely used in that sense. The word is used in common parlance to mean different things in different parts of India. In the Indian classical music lexicon, the word has acquired an extremely complex set of meanings. Let us examine one example from the Syro Malabar *Qurbānā* in Syriac. The intimate introductory dialogue between the celebrant and the congregation is an excellent example of words and phrases with multiple layers of meanings.

Celebrant: *Puqdānkōn* (literally, "Your [plural] mandate/command")

Congregation: *Puqdānē(h) damśīhâ* ("Mandate of the Messiah")

The text, like poetry, is polysemic and, therefore, a literal translation of the phrases may not do justice to the text. Primarily, it is an act of seeking permission from the community of worshippers, who turn the request around, and tell the celebrant that he already has a superior permission with the command of the Messiah. It puts the celebrant in a confident and yet humble state of mind. Theologically, the celebrant's request is an acknowledgement of the priesthood of the people (1Peter 2:5, 9) who have gathered for the supreme sacrifice. The celebrant reminds himself that those who are baptized among the worshipping community are co-offerors. According to Dr. Pathikulangara, this ritual may be of Indian origin (Pathikulangara 1998: 151-152). For unknown reasons, the Syro Malabar Church discontinued this tradition in the vernacular version without replacing it with anything that comes close. It would have been better if we had retained the Syriac text, and educated the worshippers about its meanings and significance. The vernacular versions of the *thaksā* did not adopt the practice of the celebrant seeking permission from the congregation.

There are several examples in the vernacular version of the liturgy that show a lack of sensitivity toward the original Syriac text. Let us examine one of them. The Trisagion (Thrice-holy) is an important hymn in the liturgy. The Chaldean Church adopted this chant from the Antiochene Greek liturgy. The opening phrase, "Holy [is] God" (*Hágios ho theós*), was rendered in Syriac as *qaddiśā ʾalāhâ*. The Malayalam translation reads, "Pariśudhanāya daiwame." This vocative is a mistranslation of the Greek text, which is in the nominative: Holy God! It is a contemplative and adoring exclamation, and not invoking God. Another problem is with the lyrical version of the first verse of this chant. The word *ʾalāhâ* was translated into Malayalam as *saṛwēśā* (i. e., "*saṛwathinteyum īśan*," "Lord of all"). Later, it became *Paripāwananām saṛwēśā*. *Saṛwēśan* is one of the synonyms of God, not the equivalent, which is "Daiwam," as it appears in the prose text. More over, "Lord of all" was already used in the previous chant, the Resurrection hymn. The first verse of the lyrical version of the English text that is currently in use starts with "Holy Lord of all." The translation of *Alāhā* as "Lord of all" is an error.

The lyrical version of the Lord's Prayer in the English and Malayalam *thaksā* is yet another example of inaccurate renderings of the original Syriac text. One of the greatest treasures of the Chaldean rite is the ingenious combination of the two most important religious texts: the Our Father and the hymn of the angels, the *trisagion*. The Thrice-holy appears as a trope to the verses in the Lord's Prayer: *qaddiś qaddiś qaddiśat, ʾabūn dbašmayyâ* ("Holy, holy, holy, Our Father in heaven") *Netqaddaš šmāk tētê malkūsāk, qaddiš, qaddiš, qaddišat, ʾabūn dbašmayyâ* ("Holy be Thy name, Thy kingdom come, holy, holy, holy, Our Father in heaven"). It is an unresolved irony that the lyrical version of the Lord's Prayer in the *thaksâ* contains only twice-holy in the place of the thrice-holy:

Swaṛggasthithanām thāthā nin
Nāmam pūjithamākaṇame
Nin rājyam wannītaṇame
Pariśudhan nī pariśudhan .

The reason is obvious. The person who wrote the lyrics decided on a particular poetic meter, and edited the text of Prophet Isaiah to fit the verse to the pre-determined poetic meter. That such inadequacies exist in a printed *thaksā* could be a matter of concern; that the same inaccuracy is repeated in the English version of the *thaksā* could be a matter of bewilderment.

One might wonder why we are having this discussion in a forum like this. Revising liturgical texts falls within the domain of the hierarchy of bishops who are assisted by the liturgical committee, which consists of experts on liturgy, language, church history and other related subjects. Well, one of our goals is to create an informed laity. An informed laity may have an important role to play by initiating a discussion on these and other matters, and keeping such issues afloat. Besides, Syro Malabar Catholics can freely adopt certain Syriac words that we discussed earlier into their personal and family prayer vocabulary. The bishops cannot oppose the laity if they start using the minor doxology in the traditional way, using the Syriac word *ruhā*, or even reciting the entire minor doxology in Syriac: *šūwhâ lawâ ulawarâ walrūḥâ dqudšâ*.

Parents in India invest so much time and resources to teach their children the English language; they do this for pragmatic reasons. Ironically, English speakers continue to enrich themselves by constantly borrowing words from other languages. They do so because they acknowledge the limitations the English language has in common with all languages in expressing the experiences of other people with different histories. For example, such words as yoga, guru, pundit, rāga, etc., have become part of an international vocabulary. It is impossible to translate the word yoga into another language; any translation would be insufficient. This, and other similar words, carry the wisdom and memories of praxis accumulated through millennia, and passed on from generation to generation. Therefore, such words cannot be translated into a language whose speakers did not go through those experiences. The English language is smart in enriching itself by adopting such words into its vocabulary. There is no reason why we should not be smarter.

The source of inspiration for revisiting and retaining some of the Syriac words into our vocabulary could come from the mindset of the four Gospel writers. They wrote the Gospels for the Greek-speaking Christians who were strangers to the Aramaic way of thinking. Yet, they decided to retain certain words of Jesus in the Aramaic form (Mt 27:26, Mk 5:41, Mk 7:34, etc.). What is more interesting is that the later translators of the Gospels considered those Aramaic words so sacred that they retained them along with translations in the respective languages. Therefore, we should not deny ourselves the power and the privilege of owning a few words. They only make us richer.

Reinstate permanent deacons

From matters concerning liturgical texts, let us move on to a more serious topic. A re-reading of the Syriac *thaksā* should lead to the reinstatement of permanent deacons in the Syro Malabar Church. The Chaldean liturgy that we inherited requires the deacon to serve as the master of ceremony. The deacon acts as an instructor and interpreter of the action that is going on at the *bēma* and the sanctuary; he also acts as a mediator between the celebrant and the community. Such a role is reserved to a man who has received a major ordination. At some point in time, the Syro Malabar Church stopped the practice of ordaining permanent deacons. Consequently, the current Malayalam *thaksâ* does not mention the word Deacon, or its Syriac equivalent. Instead, the *thaksâ* refers to the deacon's role merely as *śuśrūshi*/server, i. e., someone who assists the celebrant. More often than not, the role is assigned to young altar servers who are not mature enough to understand or undertake the responsibilities of a deacon.

After prolonged deliberation, the Syro Malabar Church officially reopened its doors to permanent deacons in 2013 through the *Code of Particular Law* (Part I, Title VI, Articles 55-86). The reinstatement, however, is left to the discretion of the eparchial bishop, depending on his perception of "the need of the eparchy." Article 56 of the *Code* reads: "The eparchial bishop having considered the need of the eparchy and having consulted the eparchial pastoral council and presbyteral council decides whether permanent deacons are to be ascribed to his eparchy." In other words, Article 56 does not mandate the eparchial bishop to reinstate permanent deacons, but only recommends to do so if, and only if, he thinks that their services are needed in his

diocese. The argument that every liturgical celebration, according to the Chaldean rite, requires the service of a deacon does not seem to have impressed the code writers. In view of the particular history and situation of the Syro Malabar Church, the restoration of married priesthood may or may not happen in the near future, but the restoration of permanent deacons, married or otherwise, should normally go with the restoration of the liturgy.

What more can we do to reclaim parts of the Syriac heritage?

Here are a few practical suggestions.

1. *Own it and pass it on.*

As long as the name of the **Syro** Malabar Church retains the reference to the Syriac language and liturgy, the Syriac heritage cannot be dispensed with. A separation from the past may not be in favor of the next generation; we will be creating a generation without an umbilical cord. Therefore, the first thing that the present generation can do is to own the Syriac heritage with pride, and then pass it on to the next generation with pleasure.

2. *Reinstate the Lord's Prayer in Syriac in personal and family prayer*

Language is not only a means of communication, but also a means to express intimacy. For example, my parents called their respective fathers "Appan." We, the children, called our father "Ichāchan." Not every family in the village followed that practice. In any case, whenever my siblings and I talk about our father, we refer to him as Ichāchan. For us, no other word (Chāchan, Achāchan, Appachan, Pappa, Daddy, etc.) would emote the intimacy. The St. Thomas Christians in India have a unique privilege to pray the Lord's Prayer using almost the exact words that Jesus taught His disciples. The phonetics might have been different, but the phonemes must have been the same. Even in the matter of phonetics, the Syro Malabar version (i. e., East-Syriac) is closer to the original articulation of the vowel sounds in comparison with the West Syriac version that is prevalent among the Orthodox and Jacobite Christians. This is the closest you can get to Jesus, his time, and his voice. There is absolutely no reason why the Syro Malabar Christians should not reclaim that privilege, relearn the text, relish the sound, and reconnect with the author of the prayer in an intimate way. They do not need anybody's permission to do this in their personal or family prayer, as well as non-liturgical prayer gatherings.

3. *Reinstate the tradition of giving biblical names to children*

The Syro Malabar Christians can, if they wish, bring back the tradition of giving biblical names (Hebrew/Aramaic) to their children. The name itself can be an act of witnessing. Such names as Maṛiam, Mathāi, Yohannān, Yācob, Thōmma, and Anna were quite popular until the middle of the twentieth century. These names were sometimes adapted to the Kerala setting, as for example, Maṛiāmma, Maṛiakutty, Annamma, Māthachan, etc.. Interestingly, the transitional period in liturgy also happened to be a time of secularization of the names of children among the

Syro Malabar Christians. They preferred to give non-biblical, or sometimes Hindu, names to their children in order to hide their particular religious identity. Fortunately, there seems to be a rethinking among some of the Syro Malabar Christians in this regard.

4. *Preserve the sound of the Syriac language*

A language is also a sonic entity. Each language has a distinct sound pattern and vocal inflection that are realized in speech and song. In spite of the fact that the sound of the Syriac language has undergone a transformation among the Syro Malabar Christians, it still constitutes a singular sonic presence among the sounds of other languages, and adds to the sonic diversity in India. The gradual disappearance of this distinct sound can be compared to the extinction of a particular species of bird or a plant. That the Syriac language is part of the sonic map of India only adds credit to the cultural diversity of the country. We will be doing a service to the nation, as well as the human family, by preserving this sound.

The best way to preserve the sound of the Syriac language is to teach our children a few Syriac words. Children have a tremendous power to absorb the sounds of words much before they are able to grasp the meanings. Even teenagers sing and dance to Hindi songs without fully understanding the meaning of the text.

5. *Archive the real life experiences*

A living language is embedded in the real life experiences of its practitioners. Those experiences are an integral part of the collective memory of a community. The loss of that memory is like the loss of a valuable treasure chest. The generation that handled the Syriac tradition in Kerala is on the decline, but a few of them are still alive. They are the last link to a great tradition that lasted for several centuries in Kerala. We will do well by encouraging our young people to document the life stories and experiences of the transitional generation, and preserve them for posterity. This is a time sensitive project. We only have a period of 25 to 30 years to accomplish this huge task.

6. *Reintroduce a few Syriac chants (text and music) in the vernacular liturgy*

One of the ways we can resuscitate the Syriac tradition is by way of introducing a few selected Syriac chants in the vernacular liturgy. *Puqdānkōn*, the introductory dialogue between the celebrant and the congregation, *Trisagion* (*Qaddīšâ ʿalāhâ*), minor doxology, the deacon's repeated recommendation (*Nsalle. šlāmâ ammaṇ*), *barek mār*, and the exchange of peace between the celebrant and congregation (*šlāmâ ʿamkōn/ʿammāk u ʿam rūḥāk*, are among the Syriac texts that can blend seamlessly into the vernacular *Qurbānâ*. I did one such experiment in the USA, during the celebration of the English version of the Syro Malabar *Qurbānâ* that I co-composed, at the National Shrine and Basilica of the Immaculate Conception, in Washington, D. C., on September 7, 2013. With Major Archbishop as the main celebrant, the 130-member choir

sang two chants in Syriac, *Puqdānkōn* and *Qaddīšâ ʿalāhâ*. The youngsters were enthusiastic in learning and singing these chants. The YouTube entries of these performances are getting enthusiastic responses from viewers.

7. *Preserve the melodies, even if we may not use them at the present time*

A melody, good or bad, appealing or otherwise, is a unique entity. Once made, it is forever, and becomes part of the collective memory of the community. Albeit at a microcosmic level, a melody can be a part not only of individual history, but also of the cultural history of the region that may have had interactions with peoples across time and national borders. Loss of a melody due to loss of memory, or lack of documentation, is similar to the loss of a part of our patrimony.

When Fr. Abel prepared the Malayalam version of the liturgy of the Hours and the services for the dead, he selected about 25 melodies from the existing repertoire of Syriac melodies. During a personal conversation, Fr. Abel said to me that he chose the melodies that he thought were viable for communal singing. There has not been an attempt, so far as I know, to make use of some of the other Syriac melodies in the Malayalam liturgy. Therefore, the number of Syriac melodies currently in use in the Malayalam version remains static.

At this time, I would like to make a passionate appeal to preserve three chants of the Syro Malabar Church: *Qambel Māran*, *Ēdtâ pūš(y) lēk(y) bašlāmâ*, and *Bar Maryam*. From a musicological perspective, these chants belong to the cultural treasures of humanity. We should treat them the way we treat the Taj Mahal of India. I wish our seminaries and monastic orders took special care to preserve the texts and melodies of these chants.

8. *Preserve the performance practices that are unique to the Syriac tradition*

The practice of saying or singing the same text three times is one of the characteristic features of the Syriac tradition. When sung, the repetitions may be in three ascending pitch registers. For example, in the solemn celebration of the *Qurbānâ*, the opening hymn, *Tešboḥtâ l'alāhâ bamrāwmê*, used to be sung three times in three ascending pitch registers. Sometimes, the celebrant and the choir entered into a competition to showcase their respective vocal ranges. Repetition is used as a tool to highlight the significance of a particular text and its meaning. For example, the phrase, *barēk mār*, is repeated three times on several occasions during the Syriac *Qurbānâ*. In the solemn celebration, talented priests used to sing this phrase with extended melisma and intricate ornamentations, making it a remarkable musical event in the liturgy. It may be worthwhile to mention here that the inherent musicality of the Syriac phonemes lends itself easily to these repetitions without creating monotony.

9. *Preserve the poetic meters and the prosodic practices*

The generations that celebrated the sacraments and the liturgy of the Hours in Syriac sang poetic texts composed in a variety of meters, ranging from two to seventeen verses, and with varied syllabic structures. After the vernacularization of the liturgy, the tendency has been toward using a limited number of meters that are relatively simple. Currently, our *thaksâ* is inundated with lyrics written in the *Tū ʾyay* meter. The liturgical committee may be overly underestimating the musical capacity of people. The use of incipits, singing the same text twice with two different incipits, etc., are special to the Syriac tradition. It will be worthwhile to preserve those practices not only for the sake of the liturgy, but also for the sake of the variety of musical practices.

Conclusions

The Syriac heritage of the Syro Malabar Church is an essential component of the colorful cultural fabric of India. It is a privilege to celebrate it, a duty to preserve it, and an honor to pass it on to the next generation. In order to achieve that goal, the Syro Malabar Christians may have to make their heritage a topic of conversation at the family dinner table. Such a conversation will instill a sense of pride in the minds of children. They should grow up thinking that they are special because they know how to pray in the language of Jesus, can sing melodies that are special to their community, and have rituals that no one else has. They should know that who they are, and what they do, have a reference not only to their own community, but also to the country that they live in, or their parents' country of origin.

In order to facilitate those conversations in the family, the Syriac Christians may have to expand their prayer vocabulary, and increase the liturgical literacy (i. e., familiarity with terms and concepts used in the liturgy) of the lay people. Such literacy will only enhance their intelligent participation in the liturgy. A well-informed worshipping community is also a great boon to the celebration.

In order to enliven that conversation, the Syro Malabar scholars may have to engage in an ongoing research that is independent and intellectually honest. One of the ways of safeguarding the Syriac heritage is by delving deeply into the history and veracity of the tradition. It is possible that the coming generations might accuse the present generation for being overly self-complacent, or even being intellectually dishonest, because we did not engage in deep level research. Sometimes, people rely too much on legends, and consider unproven hypotheses as self-evident truths. Scholars may be afraid to employ scientific methods to date such material objects as the granite cross in Chennai, or the wooden cross at Pallippuram (Palackal 2013b). Yet, some scholars would associate the name of the Apostle Thomas to these objects without hesitation. The Syriac inscriptions on the open-air crosses (for example, St. Mary's Forane Church at Koratty), on church bells (for example, Marth Mariam Church at Kuravilangad), as well as the reredos of the churches built or rebuilt until recently, may be carrying important information on the history and identity of the Syro Malabar Christians. There are several inscriptions on church premises in unidentified scripts. One cannot even imagine the mysteries contained in those inscriptions. They are disintegrating day by day due to the unfavorable climate conditions in Kerala.

What we are calling for is a reversal of the process that brought us to this juncture. In the middle of the twentieth century, the Syro Malabar Church wanted to explore a new identity, and tried to redefine itself by distancing from the Syriac language. Ironically, the Church continues to make use of the reference to the Syriac language in the first part of its name.

Finally, the self-awareness of the Syro Malabar Christians, who belong to the largest Church among the St. Thomas Christians, may have much more political implications than they might think. It is time for the Syro Malabar Christians to take hold of the narrative of Christian history in India. The discourses that they engage in everyday life are part of history in the making. If they do not proclaim the good news to the world that Christianity and India are complementary concepts, nobody else will. By doing so, they will be serving the country by highlighting yet another dimension of its religious, cultural, linguistic, and musical diversity. India is more than the sum of its parts.

Jai Hind!

Acknowledgement

This article is a revised version of the Denha Endowment lecture 2014 at Dharmaram Vidyakhsethram, Bengaluru, and Chavara Lectures 2014-15 at the Chavara Institute of Indian and Interreligious Studies, Rome. I would like to thank George Nedungatt, S. J. and Zacharias Thundy for a critical reading of the earlier drafts and for their valuable corrections and suggestions. I am grateful to Thomas Kalayil, C. M. I. for the English translation of the biblical passage (I Kings19:14) and for his help with the transliteration of the Syriac terms. Special thanks to Varghese Koluthara, C. M. I. for drawing my attention to the *Code of Particular Law of the Syro Malabar Church*.

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