



## Signature in Syriac (letter to Cyriac Kandathil, AKCC)

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### Signature in Syriac

Until the 1960s, priests in the Syriac churches in Kerala would quote verses from the Syriac Bible in their Sunday sermons and even their daily conversations, and put their signatures in the Syriac script in a letter or official document written in Malayalam. Even after the advent of English education during the British rule, Syriac was considered the language of education and culture among the St. Thomas Christians (This is in contrast to the current practice among many educated Christians in India who prefer to use the English version of their names in the Latin script to sign their names in personal letters and official documents that are written in Malayalam or English. We see here a letter written in Malayalam with signature in Syriac by Fr. Mattāyi Payyappilly who was secretary to Mar Augustine Kandathil (1874-1956), the first Archbishop and head of the Syro-Malabar Church. A few observations on the letter might be helpful to understand the customary practices of the time. The letter is written on the stationery of the "Archdiocese of Ernakulam, India" (see top left-hand corner). The place-name appears again in the Malayalam script on the top right-hand corner. The date (1930 March 11) appears below the place name; the year and the day are written in the Malayalam numerals (no longer in use at present), and the name of the month, according to the Gregorian calendar, is written in Malayalam script. The date is repeated below the signature at the bottom right in Arabic numerals ("11-3-1930").

The writer identifies himself in Malayalam script as "Secretary Payyappilly Mattāyi Ka" (third line from the bottom right). "Ka" is a short form for kattanār, the local designation in Malayalam for priests among the St. Thomas Christians. This is followed by the signature in Syriac (the second line from the bottom right) which reads from right to left: "q. mty pyll," i. e., qašīšā Mattāyi Payyappilly. Following an older tradition, the Syriac letters in the signature are written without vowel signs.



The word qaśīśā in Syriac means "an elder," "grandfather," or "ancestor." (Thelly 1999: 344). In both East and West Syriac traditions, this word serves as a title for priests. The first name of the writer, Mattāyi, is the Malayalam adaptation of the Syriac form, Mattay, for Matthew. Thus, the letter is an interesting indicator of the seamless blend of Indian and foreign languages in daily use in Kerala.

The letter is addressed to Mr. Cyriac Kandathil (1907-1962), a lay leader (and also the nephew of the Archbishop), is significant in the history of the Catholic Church in Kerala. In the letter Fr. Payyappilly, on behalf of the Archbishop, earnestly entreats the priests and lay people to extend support and counsel to Mr. Cyriac Kandathil to enlist more members to the All Kerala Catholic Congress, and establish its branches in each parish. Fifteen years later, Mr. Cyriac Kandathil was elected General Secretary of the Congress, in 1945. The letter is used here with permission from Dr. Thomas Kandathil, son of Cyriac Kandathil.

The practice of signing letters in Syriac is still in vogue. Even today, there are priests, though a few, who prefer to sign their names in Syriac in their personal letters and official documents written either in Malayalam or in English. Three priests among the resource persons for my study signed their names in Syriac in their correspondence with me. One of those priests, Fr. Emmanuel Thelly, C. M. I. said that he has been signing in Syriac ever since he learned the language; he does it as a sign of his respect for the language and the traditions associated with it, and to affirm his identity as a St. Thomas Christian.

**Source: *Syriac Chant Traditions in South India*. Doctoral dissertation by Joseph J. Palackal. The Graduate Center of the City University of New York. 2005, pp. 87-89.**









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