



***Oktoēchos* of the Syrian Orthodox Churches in South India**

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A unique feature of the Christian music repertoire of South India is that it continues to preserve Syriac chants that originated in the Middle East. The liturgical traditions of the early Christians in Antioch (Antakya, in southern Turkey) and Persia (present-day Iran and Iraq) reached South India at various stages in the history of the St. Thomas Christians. This article explores the system of classifying melodies in an eight-week cycle in the liturgy of the Syrian Orthodox churches, known by the Greek name *oktoēchos* (“eight voices”). The system is historically and conceptually related to the church modes of the Latin rite and the *oktoēchos* of the Byzantine rite, and shares some similarity with Near Eastern *maqām* traditions. The study of *oktoēchos* as it is preserved in South India can be useful to understanding the process of transformation of melodies and musical concepts, resulting from the transference of traditions from one culture to another. It may also help us to take a fresh look at the role and conception of geographical boundaries in musical cultures.

The St. Thomas Christians

According to tradition, St. Thomas the Apostle arrived in Kerala, on the southwest coast of India, in the middle of the first century AD; he preached the new “way” (*mārggam*), established communities (*palli*), and died a martyr at Chennai (Madras).¹ The small community was strengthened by the immigration of Christians from Persia in the fourth century. From the middle of the fifth century onwards there is historical evidence for the Indian church receiving bishops from Persia.² When the Portuguese arrived in Kochi, Kerala, in 1502, they were pleasantly surprised to find a prosperous community of Christians.³ However, their initial excitement faded soon when the missionaries realized that the local Christians followed a different litur-

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to take command of the social, liturgical, and ecclesiastical life of the local Christians. A section of the St. Thomas Christians sided with the missionaries, but the majority vehemently opposed the attempts of Latinization. They took an oath in 1653, saying that they would not subject themselves to the Jesuit prelates who represented Rome. Soon after, they appealed to the Eastern patriarchs of Antioch, Babylon, and Alexandria for assistance in the apostolic succession. The Jacobite Patriarch of Antioch responded to the request by sending to Kerala Mar Gregorios, the Jacobite bishop of Jerusalem. Bishop Gregorios' visit in 1665 became the first step in the history of the relationship between Indian Christians and the Jacobite Church of Antioch. After the death of Mar Gregorios in 1671, the Antiochean connection continued, but without any juridical authority of the Patriarch over the dissident group, who eventually came to be known by such various names as People of *puthankūr* (Malayalam, "people of new allegiance"), Jacobites, or Syrian Orthodox. In 1751 the Patriarch of Antioch sent Mar Baselios, Mar Gregorios, Ramban John, and two other clerics to Kerala with a letter claiming juridical supremacy over the people of new allegiance. This mission was only partially successful. Finally, the Patriarch himself, Peter III, visited Kerala in 1876 and convened a synod at Mulanthuruthy, near Kochi. During the Synod he established his juridical supremacy over the people of new allegiance. However, conflicting claims of affiliation and allegiances led to more divisions in the subsequent centuries.

Antiochean Liturgy in South India

The introduction of the Antiochean liturgy in South India was a slow and gradual process that took more than a century, from the 1750s to the 1860s.⁹ Although Bishop Gregorios of Jerusalem celebrated liturgy in the Antiochean rite during his stay in Kerala (1665–71), the circumstances were not congenial enough for him to impose the rite and its doctrinal tenets on the St. Thomas Christians who, by then, were celebrating mass and the sacraments in a modified Chaldean rite under the supervision of the Portuguese missionaries. However, the Bishop sowed seeds of contempt among the local Christians against the "idoltrous Romans" and those among the St. Thomas Christians "who came under the influence of the wicked Kings and Queens of Portugal" (Baselios [1973] 1997:101).

A significant phase in the history of the Antiochean liturgy in Kerala started with the arrival of Bishop Baselios and his entourage, in 1751. As a way of forging a separate identity and thereby gaining control over the people of new allegiance, the Bishop and his companions introduced the different *anaphoras* (Eucharistic prayer) of the Antiochean rite. They do not seem to have attempted a complete replacement of the Chaldean liturgical tradition



with that of the Antiochean tradition, and consequently, for more than a century the Antiochean and Chaldean liturgies co-existed side by side.

In 1847 Joachim Cyril, another Antiochean bishop, arrived in Kerala and stayed until 1874. He took upon himself the mission of a complete transition from the Chaldean to the Antiochean liturgy. He replaced the East Syriac script with the West Syriac (Antiochean) script. In 1876 Patriarch Peter III completed the final stages of the transition during his visitation to the churches brought under his juridical power.

Until the 1960s, the Syrian Orthodox churches celebrated the liturgy in Syriac. The process of vernacularization started in the early 1960s. The mass was translated first into Malayalam, the language of Kerala, where most Syrian Orthodox Christians live. A Tamil translation of the missal and prayers for a few other occasions was printed in 1965 for the use of the communities in Tamil Nadu. Also, a Kannada edition of the missal for use in the Karnataka area was published in 1980. Currently, mass and Offices are celebrated both in Syriac and Malayalam in seminaries and religious formation houses in Kerala. The communities in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka use mostly the vernacular version of these texts. The music examples discussed in this chapter in connection with the *oktoēchos* are from the Malayalam edition of the Syriac texts.

The Oktoēchos in Syria

A distinguishing feature of the music repertory of the Antiochean rite is the system of classifying melodies into eight categories, known by the Greek name *oktoēchos* ("eight voices"). According to Aelred Cody, the system originated in the Greco-Syriac linguistic frontier in Syria and Palestine as part of "a musical culture shared largely by both Hellenistic and Aramean Christians" (Cody 1982:106). After extensive research on the early history of *oktoēchos* in Syria, Cody concluded that "[t]here is really no evidence for the existence of an *oktoēchos* in any sense before the eighth century, or perhaps the seventh" (102). In doing so, Cody disqualified the widely-held belief that Severus of Antioch (ca. 465-538) was the progenitor of *oktoēchos*, and that "the musical system of eight modes or the Byzantine liturgical arrangements of texts by mode or both were already in use in Antioch in the early sixth century" (91).

The Oktoēchos in South India

The historiography of the Antiochean liturgical music tradition in India is made difficult because of the paucity of documentary evidence. The process of introducing the music might have been slower than that of introduc-



ing the liturgical texts and theological tenets. In all probability, people continued to sing the Antiochean chants using the Chaldean melodies that were familiar to them. Both West Syriac and East Syriac liturgical chants followed the same Syriac prosody.

The vast liturgical music repertory of the Antiochean rite may be divided into two main categories: chants that fall under the system of eight classes of melodies (oktoēchos), and those that have only a single melody. The chants of the Office and mass belong to the first category, and the chants of the Holy Week and other special occasions belong to the second category. The focus of this study will be on the chants in the first category.

The system of singing the same text in eight different melodies in an eight-week cycle is referred to variously as *eṭṭuniṛam* (Malayalam, “eight colors”), *eṭṭurāgam* (“eight rāgams”), oktoēchos (Greek, “eight voices”), and *eqārā* (Syriac, “root,” “origin”). The first two are indigenous terms in Malayalam and are the most common. The term *eṭṭuniṛam* is a combination of two words, *eṭṭu*, “eight,” and *niṛam*, “color.” Semantically similar to the first, the second term combines the Malayalam word *eṭṭu* with the Sanskrit word *rāg*, which also means “color.” While referring to a particular color, both terms take the number as an adjectival prefix, as in *onnām niṛam* (“first color”) and *onnām rāgam*, etc. Syntactically, both *niṛam* and *rāgam* should have a plural suffix in Malayalam, *ngal*, as in *eṭṭuniṛangal* or *eṭṭurāgangal*. However, in this case, people seem to ignore the syntactic rule in favor of easy utterance in every day speech.

The clergy and the educated laity of the Orthodox churches are familiar with the borrowed terms, oktoēchos and *eqārā*. Nonetheless, these terms are not part of the common parlance. Between the two, *eqārā* seems to be preferred, probably because of the Syriac origin of the word. However, my informants could not say how or when these terms came to be used in Kerala.

The transference of a musical tradition from one culture to another may entail transformation of the underlying musical concepts. In retrospect, the wisdom of the local Christians in avoiding a direct translation of the foreign terms into the local language is commendable. The Malayalam translation of oktoēchos and *eqārā*, respectively as *eṭṭuśabdangal* (“eight sounds” or “eight voices”) and *eṭṭuwērukāḷ* (“eight roots”) would not have satisfactorily conveyed the musical connotations.¹⁰ Instead of adopting those terms into the language, they adapted the indigenous terms, *niṛam* and *rāgam*.

The equivalence of the two words, *niṛam* and *rāgam*, deserves discussion. In common parlance in Malayalam, both words are polysemic. The word *niṛam* is used primarily to denote the perceptual phenomenon of color. Figuratively, it is used to mean the nature or character of an individual. For example, the phrase *tani niṛam* (literally, “one’s own color”) refers not to



the color of the skin, but to a person's true character. In a different context, *niṛam* may connote a particular character in a drama. For instance, in *kathakali* (the dance drama of Kerala), the faces of noble, virtuous, and heroic characters are painted green, and those of the demonic and mean-spirited characters are painted black. Therefore, *paçça niṛam* ("green color") and *kari niṛam* ("black color") are used as technical terms to refer to the respective characters in the drama. What is significant here is that in the normal usage *niṛam* does not have musical connotations.

The word *rāgam* comes from the Sanskrit root *ranj*, which primarily means "color." Among the other meanings of *ranj* are "to appease," "to conciliate," etc. The word is used in literary Malayalam with its primary and secondary meanings. The Sanskrit-English Dictionary of P. K. Gode and C. G. Karve lists twenty meanings for the word *rāg*; the first three are related to color, the fourth is related to different forms of love and affection, and the musical connotations are listed as ninth and tenth in the list (Gode and Karve 1959:1333). In Malayalam, *rāgam* is used for all three levels of meaning as color, passionate love,¹¹ and music.

In the context of the Orthodox liturgy both the laity and the clergy use *niṛam* and *rāgam* interchangeably to refer to a comprehensive and multidimensional psycho-acoustical experience of music (i.e., text, melody, and human voice) along with the affective elements associated with that experience.¹² However, since *rāgam* has a different set of connotations in the Sanskrit theory and practice of Indian classical music, I shall avoid using *rāgam* interchangeably with *niṛam* in this study. I shall use Color (with an upper case C) and *niṛam* interchangeably. While referring to the system of classification of Colors in general, I shall use the term *eṭṭuniṛam*.

Eight Colors and the Eight-Week Cycle

As a system, *eṭṭuniṛam* may be considered a cyclic genre, because it is performed in a cycle of eight weeks. The same verbal text is sung in eight different ways within the span of eight-week cycles within the liturgical year. The prescription of Colors for the days of the week as well as for the eight-week cycle is called the *eqārā* canon. The eight Colors are organized into two sets of four pairs each in the following manner: 1-5, 2-6, 3-7, 4-8 and 5-1, 6-2, 7-3, 8-4. One Color is prescribed for each day, and one pair of Colors for each week in serial order. A twenty-four hour liturgical day begins with the evening prayer (*ṛamśo*) and ends with the afternoon prayer on the following day. Thus, the week of Color 1 begins with *ṛamśo* on Saturday evening (i.e., *ṛamśo* of Sunday); Color 1 will continue in all the Offices until Sunday afternoon. Color 5 will start with evening prayer on Sunday (i.e., *ṛamśo* of Monday), and so on. Table 1 shows the distribution of Colors in an eight-week cycle.



Table 1. The order of Colors in eight weeks.

Week 1.

Sunday	Color 1	Monday	Color 5
Tuesday	Color 1	Wednesday	Color 5
Thursday	Color 1	Friday	Color 5
Saturday	Color 1		

Week 2.

Sunday	Color 2	Monday	Color 6
Tuesday	Color 2	Wednesday	Color 6
Thursday	Color 2	Friday	Color 6
Saturday	Color 2		

Week 3.

Sunday	Color 3	Monday	Color 7
Tuesday	Color 3	Wednesday	Color 7
Thursday	Color 3	Friday	Color 7
Saturday	Color 3		

Week 4.

Sunday	Color 4	Monday	Color 8
Tuesday	Color 4	Wednesday	Color 8
Thursday	Color 4	Friday	Color 8
Saturday	Color 4		

Week 5.

Sunday	Color 5	Monday	Color 1
Tuesday	Color 5	Wednesday	Color 1
Thursday	Color 5	Friday	Color 1
Saturday	Color 5		



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