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Reviving the Sound, Sentiments, and Melodies
of the Aramaic chants in India:

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Reviving the Sound, Sentiments, and Melodies of Aramaic chants in the Syro Malabar Church: Revisiting the Past to Redefine the Future

video presentation

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Abstract

The generation that lived through the transition of liturgy from Syriac (Aramaic) to the vernacular in the 1960s in the Syro Malabar Church in India continues to own an extensive memory base of sounds, melodies, and meanings and collective memories of the Syriac chants; these were once significant markers of the identity of the St. Thomas Christians, also known as Syriac Christians. While many chant texts are available in books and manuscripts, the melodies and their specific sonorities, mainly transmitted orally, gradually fade from the memories of the transitional generation. This generation is the last link to a unique legacy of the linguistic and musical traditions that came about through cultural interaction between India and West Asia, starting from the early Christian era. The interactions between the St. Thomas Christians and the Portuguese missionaries in the sixteenth century led to the creation of a vast repertoire of the Syriac translation of Latin chants. The video presents excerpts from the recent attempts to revive the memories and melodies and transfer them to the younger generation of the Syro Malabar Catholics in India and the USA. The current political upheavals in the Middle East, which is the primary source of the Syriac heritage in India, adversely affect the preservation of these cultural treasures of humanity. Hence the relevance of the Aramaic Project in India. The video will also draw attention to the endangered linguistic and musical treasures that deserve immediate scholarly attention.

The video is available on YouTube. search words: Aramaic Project-233

Motivating factors behind launching the Aramaic Project

An urgent need to preserve the sound of an ancient language. A language is also a sonic entity. Over the centuries, the Syriac dialect of the Aramaic language has assumed a unique sound in the multi-lingual context of South India. That sound is valuable to the diachronic study of the language's history and the region's linguistic culture. Our generation shall not let the sound of this sacred language be lost forever because of negligence. Five hundred years from now, people should not look at the Syriac script as we look at the hieroglyphics and wonder how these words sounded in this part of the world.

Syriac chants belong to a music system. The Syriac chant repertory is not an at-random collection of melodies but is unique with a musical grammar and syntax in the form of poetic genres, prosodic features, melodic range, performance practices, and a unique manner of ornamentation of the ultimate vowel sound in a phrase or verse. Also, the rhythm in Syriac chants is linear (different from the cyclic rhythm in Indian classical music). The application of rhythm is in conjunction with the Syntactic and semantic structures of the verses. For these reasons, the Syriac chant repertory deserves attention as a *Sangeet Paddhati*, a music system, and should find a place in India's music textbooks.

Expansion of a received tradition in India. There were such luminaries as Fr. Chandy Kadavil (1588-1673; Perczel 2014: 30-49) in Kerala, who mastered the language well enough to write



acrostic hymns in Syriac. Fr. Kadavil was famous among the clergy, and the Portuguese missionaries acknowledged his extraordinary capabilities and referred to him in their letters to Portugal as "Alexander the Indian." The Syriac clergy in Kerala were capable enough to build on the received tradition from West Asia.[\[i\]](#)

Latin chants in Syriac translation: A unique chant repertory of the Syro Malabar Catholics in Kerala. The interaction between the Catholic St. Thomas Christians in Kerala and the Portuguese missionaries led to the creation of a new repertory of Syriac chants, starting from the seventeenth century. Initially, the missionaries tried to persuade the local Christians to change the liturgy from Syriac to Latin. The St. Thomas Catholics vehemently opposed the idea. In due course, the local Christians adopted several Latin-rite practices. The most popular among them is Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, novena to saints, and *ladīn* (Malayalam adaptation of the Portuguese word, *ladainha*, meaning "litany"). These services had their repertories of chants in the Latin rite. However, language became a bone of contention in introducing these chants in the Syro-Malabar churches. Since the Syriac Christians were unwilling to give up their liturgical language, the missionaries had to arrange translations of the Latin texts into Syriac. This gave rise to an entirely new and unique category of Syriac chants in Kerala. Here are a few examples of the Syriac version of Latin chants:

Veni Creator Spiritus (Come O Spirit Creator)[\[ii\]](#)

Te Deum Laudamus (Praise to Thee, God) [\[iii\]](#)

Salve Regina (Hail Queen)[\[iv\]](#)

Pange Lingua (Praise, my Tongue)[\[v\]](#)

Litanies of the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Joseph, and Sacred Heart of Jesus.[\[vi\]](#)

The names and dates of translators and composers of the Syriac versions of the Latin chants are not yet available. The translation process might have started in the early seventeenth century and lasted until the end of the nineteenth century. Those Portuguese and Spanish priests who knew both Latin and Syriac, or indigenous priests who were well versed in these languages, might have done the translations. Alternatively, it might have been a collaborative effort by the foreign and indigenous priests.

It is unclear if the Syriac texts were initially sung to existing Latin melodies. The transcriptions of melodies of the Syriac texts available from 1937 (Saldanha 1937, Kulathinal 1948, and Vadakel 1954) show heightened compositional activities in Kerala before 1937. The transcriptions show indigenous musical characteristics, for example, rhythmic structures that are popular in India, such as the six-beat *tāḷam* with accents on the first and the third beats and the seven-beat *tāḷam* with accents on the first, fourth, and sixth beats. The transcriptions of melodies do not indicate a polyphonic setting. There is no written or other evidence of polyphonic performance in the Syro-Malabar churches. The use of instrumental accompaniment, specifically melodic instrumental accompaniment, is indicated in a few transcriptions. Some transcriptions include instrumental introductions, interludes, and short links between phrases. The length of these introductions and interludes may vary from three notes to several measures. For example, a short chant in Saldanha (1937: 113-114) has eighteen introduction measures and a 24-measure interlude.

Christianity is an Eastern religion, and India is part of that Eastness. The opening verse in the Book of Esther is worthy of attention. "During the reign of Ahasuerus—this was the Ahasuerus who ruled over a hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia ..." (Esther 1:1). My friend, Prof. Zach Thundy thinks that the theology of the fourth gospel is of Indian origin (Thundy 2020 : 60-72), and he attributes the authorship of the Gospel to Thomas the Apostle of India (Thundy 2021:165-178). In any case, Christianity is an integral part of the cultural fabric of India, making the country a part of the geography of early Christianity. It adds to the greatness of the wonder that *IS* India.

The video

The short video (26: 27) is a progress report on the Aramaic Project that the Christian Musicological Society of India started in 2013. The video contains ten chapters. The first chapter shows how young Syro Malabar Catholics in the USA are trying to connect with their Syriac past. For example, Sophya Chirayil, a young college graduate, says her favorite Syriac chant is "Qandisa Alaha" (Holy God), the Syriac version of the Trisagion, and sings it during her daily morning prayer. The Syro Malabar Youth Choir in Houston, Texas, sang the famous Christological hymn "Sagdinan Mar" (We Praise you Lord) during Qurbana at the North American Syro Malabar Convention on 31 July 2019. Also, George Njarakkunnel, a young Sunday School teacher at the Syro Malabar community in the Bronx in New York, went to his native place in Kerala in search of a bride and eventually did a wedding in Kerala. He insisted on including two Syriac chants in the nuptial Qurbana. Chapter II shows how the Idea of a bilingual Qurbana is gaining momentum in the USA. Syro Malabar Qurbana in English, with the addition of two Syriac chants, was put to the test on 7 September 2013 at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D. C., with the Major Archbishop Cardinal George Alencherry as the celebrant. Over 125 youngsters from the Syro Malabar communities across America sang in the choir. This was the first time the youth got acquainted with the Syriac chant tradition. In the coming years, different Syro Malabar communities adopted the practice of incorporating at least one Syriac chant into the Sunday celebrations of Qurbana. Currently, most communities in the USA sing "Qandisa Alaha" (Holy God), the Syriac version of the Trisagion. Chapter III highlights the enthusiasm among young children in learning and singing Syriac chants. It indicates that the Syriac heritage of the Syro Malabar Church is a topic of conversation in their homes.

Chapter IV shows the reentry of the famous Christological hymn, "Sagdinan Mar" (We Praise you Lord), into the liturgical life of the Syro Malabar Catholics. Years ago, this chant had a prominent place in the catechetical formation of the Syriac Christians in Kerala. In chapter V, we see a reintroduction of the traditional crowning ceremony during the celebration of baptism and marriage. Interestingly, this has resulted from a grass root level movement on the part of young Syro Malabar Catholics in Kerala. The official ritual does not include the crowning ceremony that the Church relinquished several centuries ago.

Chapter VI shows a new pedagogy for catechetical training using simple but theologically profound Aramaic phrases. One example is Thomas the Apostle's shortest and simplest profession of faith, in two words, Mar Walah (My Lord and my God). Currently, catechism teachers are making the young children acquainted with the phrase's sound and meaning. Eventually, this theologically profound phrase might become part of the prayer vocabulary and



the favorite mantra of the St. Thomas Christians. This chapter also shows the four-year-old Ramsha Mariyam Payyappally singing Sagdinan Mar at her home. The girl does not understand that this is the hymn that puts to rest major Christological controversies. Nonetheless, the chant is becoming a part of her prayer life, and eventually, she will realize the catechetical value of the words. Chapter VII reports the current status of a new section in the Aramaic Project on music ecumenism. The goal is to increase awareness of the shared traditions among the various Syriac churches. Despite the divisions, standard Syriac texts are sung to different melodies. This part is beneficial, especially to musicologists and cultural historians. Chapter VII provides an example of the bilingual singing of a Syriac chant. Here the celebrant sings the verses of the chant "Qambel Māran" from the offices for the dead in Syriac and the congregation sings the Malayalam translation of the text in the original melody. The practice of bilingual singing might help people to become more comfortable with the Syriac text and sound. Chapter IX shows the potential of an ongoing digital encyclopedia of Syriac chants of the Syro Malabar Church. The encyclopedia has already become a reference point for singers and scholars, and people who are curious about India.

Chapter X deals with the urgent need for digitizing old liturgical books in Kerala. The geographical domain of the Syro Malabar Church keeps expanding and expatriate Catholics need easy access to digital sources of information. Chapter XI proposes building a central digital library of Christianity in India. Such a source of information is conspicuous by its absence at present. The website of the Christian Musicological Society of India can be developed to fill the need. Finally, chapter XII highlights the possibility of creating Christian musicology in India. The liner notes to the videos on the Society's YouTube Channel can be a starting point. Future scholars can use these videos as primary sources and create a musicological narrative by expanding on the liner notes.

Conclusions

The continuing presence of an ancient linguistic and its musical traditions far away from their origin's geographical locations is an unusual cultural phenomenon that calls for greater academic attention from scholars in multiple disciplines. The Syriac tradition reached Kerala in the early Christian era and flourished there until the middle of the twentieth century when the Syriac churches translated the liturgy into the vernacular. Almost half a century later, the Aramaic Project aimed to revive sound, sentiments, and melodies. So far, the Project is gaining momentum, especially among the younger generation of Syro Malabar Catholics.

The tolerant attitude and the multi-cultural milieu of India served the survival of the Syriac tradition in India. This West Asian tradition took its roots in India and established its own musical and linguistic identities. Thus, India is part of the geography of Early Christianity and Early Christian music.

We may use this forum to formulate an application to UNESCO to consider the Syriac tradition in India as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity.

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[i] See an example of the performance practice of the eighteenth couplet ("Sagdīnan Mār") of the famous Christological hymn, "Brīk Hannānā" in Aramaic Project-107E <https://youtu.be/2IK8-4vOao0>. Accessed 24 June 2022.

[ii] Palackal, Joseph. 2002. Qambel Maran: Syriac Chants from South India. Audio CD. Track # 23. Netherlands: Pan Records.

[iii] See Aramaic Project-52 R. <https://youtu.be/qDtfaNfQc2g>.

[iv] Palackal, Joseph. 2002. Qambel Maran: Syriac Chants from South India. Audio CD. Track # 24. Netherlands: Pan Records.

[v] Palackal, Joseph. 2002. Qambel Maran: Syriac Chants from South India. Audio CD. Track # 21. Netherlands: Pan Records.

[vi] Palackal, Joseph. 2002. Qambel Maran: Syriac Chants from South India. Audio CD. Track # 19. Netherlands: Pan Records.

István

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