

SYRIAC MUSIC OF THE SYRO MALABAR CHURCH , INDIA

JOSEPH J. PALACKAL

mārggam
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Christian Musicological Society of India

Liturgy in the Syriac language, a dialect of Aramaic and the mother tongue of Jesus, arrived in South India in the early Christian era. As a result of unusual historical trajectories, the Syriac language and liturgical traditions became a part of the South Indian culture and continue to be so in the twenty-first century. The musical styles associated with the Syriac liturgies bear testimony to the cultural interactions between India, West Asia, and Western Europe over the centuries. The presence of these traditions brings India into the world map of early Christianity. The survival story of these traditions is worth the attention of scholars on religion, cultural studies, linguistics, discussions on the early Christian way of thinking, movement of cultures and thought processes across national borders, and the underlying process of the formation of different musical traditions in the world.

ARAMAIC CHRISTIANITY IN SOUTH INDIA

For almost one thousand years, the biggest export item from India was religion. That religion was not Hinduism; it was Buddhism (Sen 2005: xii). Soon after Emperor Ashoka (d. 232 BCE) embraced Buddhism, the Emperor became its most prominent promoter. Emperor Ashoka sent missionaries to different parts of the world. More importantly, the Emperor laid down rules for respectful dialogue among the followers of different religious traditions. So, by the time Christianity came on the scene, India had already prepared a mindset that could welcome diverse ideas and philosophies. In this context, we talk about the movement of Christianity from West Asia to South India.

Christianity probably came to South India before the preaching of Jesus became a formal religion. The St. Thomas Christians in India believe that the Christian faith came to Kerala, on the southwest coast of India, through St. Thomas, the Apostle. The region was known to West Asia through the spice trade. Possibly, the Apostle joined one of the trade ships to South India. In any case, the St. Thomas Christians received the gospel message from the Apostle, who made the most robust profession of faith in just two words in the Aramaic Language: "Mār(y) wālāh(y)" ("My Lord and my God"). Those words were an exuberant outburst when Jesus appeared, primarily to pacify Thomas the Apostle (Jn 20:28). While the other disciples were doubtful, Apostle Thomas acclaimed Jesus as both man and God; more than three centuries later, the Council of Nicaea (325) reaffirmed that faith in many more words. The St. Thomas Christians claim the privilege of receiving the faith directly from the mouth of the Aramaic-speaking Apostle. They continue to celebrate this faith and the messenger in songs, dances, as well as liturgy.

In the fourth century, there was an immigration of Jewish converts to Christianity to Kerala. The local rulers were tolerant, and the immigrant Christians enjoyed the freedom to continue the practices of their faith in the new land and engage in social and commercial activities. They strengthened the Christian presence in South India. The thriving Christian community continued cultural and commercial connection with the Middle East. They welcomed Bishops from the Middle East to look after their religious needs. Gradually, the liturgy in East Syriac, the native tongue of Thomas the Apostle, became part of the Christian culture in Kerala.

In the subsequent centuries, this apostolic faith flourished in South India by adapting to the multicultural milieu of the country. In effect, a new form of Christianity evolved in South India. The Christian community in South India does not seem to have been aware of the Greek term, *Christianos*, that the followers of the Jesus movement in Antioch used to identify themselves. Instead, they identified themselves as followers of the *Mārggam* (the way) of St. Thomas. Interestingly, the term *Mārggam* is of Buddhist origin. Early on, the Acts of the Apostles referred to the Jesus movement as the Way (Acts 9:2; 18:26; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 14:12). We do not know the reason for the striking similarity in the thought process. We do not know if the Apostle was already familiar with the Sanskrit tradition before embarking on the missionary journey. In any case, we see in South India a Christianity that is comfortably Indian in many respects. Also, the texts of the ancient Christian songs and liturgical texts bear testimony to the great attachment of the early Christians to the Apostle Thomas as their father in faith (see Palackal 2016: 341). Christianity flourished in South India without facing any challenges until the dawn of the sixteenth century.

Encounter with the Roman Catholic form of Christianity

Missionaries joined Vasco de Gama on his second trip to India. They landed at Kochi in central Kerala in 1502¹. The local Christians extended a hearty welcome to de Gama and his companions, who were pleasantly surprised to see a prosperous Christian community that lived in harmony with its predominantly Hindu neighbors. However, the initial exuberance faded when the missionaries realized that St. Thomas Christians professed allegiance to the Chaldean Patriarch in Babylon and received bishops from the East Syrian Church and used the liturgy in East Syriac. The missionaries wanted the local Christians to conform to the post-Tridentine Roman rite that they followed. The conflicting world views led to a division among the St. Thomas Christians between those who accepted the viewpoint of the missionaries and those who resisted it. The section of St. Thomas Christians who accepted the leadership of the missionaries eventually came to be known as Syro Malabar Church. More divisions took place in the subsequent centuries. The Syro Malabar Church is currently one of the eight *sui juris* churches among the St. Thomas Christians in India. Among these eight churches, the Syro Malabar Church and the Church of the East use Chaldean liturgy in East Syriac. The melodic traditions, however, are different. The other churches use one form or the other of the Antiochene liturgy in West Syriac.

Reference to the Syriac language is a part of the names of the churches of the St. Thomas Christians. For example, in the name of the Syro Malabar Church, "Syro" stands for Syriac language and liturgical tradition, and "Malabar" is the older name for the region now known as Kerala. Thus, the Syriac language, liturgy, theology, and music continue to be essential components of India's "Syriac Christian" identity. The Syriac Christians took pride in continuing the legacy of the Syriac tradition that connected them to the original *kerygma* of Jesus and the Apostles. The clergy considered it a privilege to say the Lord's Prayer and the Institution Narrative in the original words from the mouth of Jesus. Even those Christians who followed the Portuguese missionaries in matters of worship and rituals refused to relinquish the tradition of

¹ De Gama made the third and final trip to Kerala in 1524. He died during his stay in Kochi, on 24 December 1524.

the Syriac language. Therefore, they translated the Latin chants and prayers into Syriac and incorporated them into their ancient East-Syriac liturgy. All these historical trajectories led to the creation of a unique music repertory in the Syro Malabar Church.

Taken together, the Syriac churches of the St. Thomas Christians in India own a vast repertory of melodies, Middle Eastern, Indian, and syncretic, that deserves scholarly attention. However, the focus of this article is limited to the Syriac music of the Syro Malabar Church.

Salient Features of Syriac chants

1. *Rēš Qālā*: A compositional technique in Syriac poetry

One of the significant features of the Syriac liturgy is the use of what is known as *rēš qālā*, which means "head melody" or "head song" (from two Syriac words, *rēš*, meaning "head" and *qālā*, meaning "song," "melody," or "tune,"). The term connotes the first strophe of a particular chant written in a specific meter and the melody associated with that chant. The word *rēš* refers to the first stanza of a strophic chant (i. e., all the stanzas have the same meter and melody). A *rēš qālā* is a compositional design that serves as metric and melodic models for creating new chant texts to an existing melody. Hence the term "model melody." A model melody may be described as a complete and fixed tune associated with a text composed in a specific poetic meter. Thus, a single melody is used to sing multiple texts, all in the same poetic meter, for different occasions in the liturgy. Besides being a compositional device to create new chant texts, model melodies serve to bring musical variety to any given liturgical service.

A *rēš qālā* is designated by the initial word (or words) of the first verse of a well-known chant; less frequently, the first words of the incipit (see below), if the chant has one, may serve as the title. Several factors make certain chants more popular than the others: the sanctity of the author (for example, St. Ephrem the Syrian, St. Jacob of Sarug), antiquity, thematic content, or even poetic qualities of the text. For the same reasons, sometimes a *rēš qālā* may be known by more than one title. In any event, the title connotes three things: the text of the specific chant from which the title is taken, the particular melody associated with that chant, and the chants composed in the same poetic meter and melody.

Similar practices of using model strophes as compositional and pedagogical tools can be found in other chant traditions. In the Byzantine tradition, for example, a model strophe of an ode is called *heirmos* (Gk., "stanza"). All stanzas of each ode in a *Kanōn* (Gk., "rule") are metrically similar to the first and are sung to the same melody. Each *Kanōn* has nine odes corresponding to the nine biblical canticles, each having a different melody. The handbook that contains the collection of model strophes, with or without melodies, is called *Heirmologion*. The chanters learn the melodies of the *heirmoi* so that they can sing, taking their cue from the incipit, texts that are metrically similar to a *heirmos* by adapting its melody (see Velimirović 2001: 332-332; Wellesz [1961] 1998: 141-142).

The concept of *rēš qālā* may be better understood in comparison with the other category of chants that have a single text and a single melody and are sung only on a specific occasion. For instance, the text and melody of the chant *Qabbel Māran* is sung only during the celebration of the short version of the Office for the dead and, that too, only when it comes

after a memorial mass.² Similarly, the text and melody of the chant *Ēdā Pūš Lēk(y) Bašlāmā* ("Farewell, O Church") is sung only on a particular occasion, namely, the funeral of priests.³

A *rēš qālā* is used to sing any of the following general categories of chants based on the poetic form, thematic content, or performance practice: *Bāūtā*, prayer of supplication; *Hūtāmā*, the concluding prayers at the end of a service; *Tešbōhtā*, a chant of praise; *Madrašā*, a dogmatic, apologetic, or philosophical chant; *Sōgītā*, a dialogic canticle that includes dramatic situations in which different characters speak; *Turgāmā* (from *targum*, "to interpret," "translate"), a chant that serves as an interpretation of a biblical text, sung before the reading (or chanting) of the epistle and gospel; *Ōnūtā*, an antiphonal hymn, the most popular category of chant in Syriac liturgy.

Because of the vernacularization of the liturgy, the term *rēš qālā* is gradually losing currency even among the clergy in the Syro Malabar Church, but the concept is very much in use. The Malayalam breviaries indicate in parenthesis the Syriac title of the *rēš qālā*. The Syriac text, printed in Malayalam script, reminds the singer of the original Syriac melody in which the Malayalam text is to be sung. The term is still in vogue among the clergy and the laity of the Church of the East. Similar to the practice in the Syro-Malabar Church, the Malayalam liturgical texts of this church indicate the *rēš qālā* (written in either Syriac or Malayalam script) at the top of each chant.

Although the concept is the same, the model melodies of the Church of the East are different from those of the Syro Malabar Church. A comparative study of the model melodies of the two churches remains to be undertaken.

2. Incipits

The Syriac melodies can be divided into two groups: those with an incipit and those that do not. The incipit is called in Syriac *šūrāyā*, meaning "indication," or "predication". It consists of a short verse taken from any of the books in the Bible; the Book of Psalms is the favorite. The primary function is to indicate or introduce the theme of a strophe or even the entire chant. There are at least four different ways of employing the incipits. The first and the most common practice is to have a different incipit for each strophe of a chant. Second, some chants have only one incipit, which functions as a thematic introduction to the entire chant. For example, the acrostic hymn of praise composed by St. Ephrem the Syrian (c. 306- 373)⁴ with the letters of *Išō Mišīhā* ("Jesus Christ") has only one incipit that introduces the general theme of the hymn: Christ the light of the world. There are ten strophes in this hymn, and each strophe makes one or more

² See note on track # 14, in Palackal (2002: 10). See an example of a bilingual (Syriac and Malayalam) singing of this chant in Aramaic Project-57 https://youtu.be/RDl0PEvJb_0. See the text, transliteration, and translation in the digital *Encyclopedia of Syriac Chants* <http://www.thecmsindia.org/qambel-maran>. Accessed 29 October 2021.

³ See a detailed study of this chant in Palackal (2016: 340-360). For a discussion on this chant, see Aramaic Project-230 <https://youtu.be/tSUIZRiGhxU>. Accessed 29 October 2021.

⁴ See more on St. Ephrem at <http://www.thecmsindia.org/personalities/st-ephrem-the-syrian>. Accessed 1 July 2021.

references to light ("nuhr," in Syriac).⁵ Third, there are also instances of singing a single-strophe chant twice, each time with a different incipit. For example, the antiphonal "Anthem of the Mysteries" (*Pagrē(h) damšīhā* "the body of the Messiah") consists of two incipits and a single strophe of eight verses.⁶ In this particular case, the first incipit is sung twice. The practice of singing the same chant text with two or more different incipits seems to be a unique feature of the Chaldean rite.

Incipits also have a melodic function. The incipit serves as a cue to the melody of the strophe. The choir leader selects a pitch that is comfortable for the community. The incipit is sung in a recitative style. The choir leader intones the incipit, and the community sings the strophes, in a solo-group format. The performance practice is as follows: the community forms into two groups, each with a designated choir leader. The leader of group A intones the incipit, and the group sings the first strophe; then the leader of group B intones the incipit of the second strophe, and the group sings that strophe, and so on.

More often than not, incipits are in prose form and, therefore, do not follow the syllabic structure of the strophes or the rhythm of the main melody. However, the slow, medium or fast pace of the intonation of incipit can, and often does determine the overall tempo of the strophe.

The use of textual and melodic incipits as an aid to memory for performers is prevalent in Latin chant tradition. While discussing the transmission process of what came to be known as Gregorian chant, Leo Treitler, in his book *With Voice and Pen* (Treitler 2003), cites examples of collections of Sequences and Antiphons that have incipits. For instance, a German sequence collection meant for local distribution has in the margin neumes and textual incipits of other famous sequences. The scribe who wrote the entries in the margin intended them as "an instruction to the singer to sing this text to the well-known tune of such-and-such" (p. 140). Similarly, a collection of antiphons for the Easter season in the Old Roman Antiphoner London Add. 29987 have incipits of antiphons assigned to another feast. Here, too, "the incipit was an indication to the singer to follow the model of its melody" (p. 141, note 13). The use of incipits in both instances is functionally similar to the practice in the Syriac chant traditions. The use of model strophes and incipits in Syriac, Byzantine, and Latin chant may be transmission techniques in oral traditions.

3. Rhythmic Aspects of Syriac chants

The relatively simple melodies of the Syriac chants employ a rather complex rhythmic concept. Rhythm may be understood less as an attribute of the melody than as an effect of the poetic text and its prosody. The underlying principle of rhythm is the articulation of the Syntactic (syllables/words/phrases) and the semantic structures of the verses. The application of short or long pauses, neumes, and melismas serve to cement the semantic structure. For that reason, rhythm may be characterized as referential, i.e., rhythm exists only in reference to the text. The

⁵ See the text of this chant in Bedjan ([1938]2002: 35); See a recording of this chant in the voice of Fr. Emmanuel Thelly, CMI, in Aramaic Project-Part-1B. <https://youtu.be/IJyBiLzqqcU>. Accessed 29 September 2021.

⁶ See an example in Aramaic Project-243 <https://youtu.be/9EPjrBLkWm0>. Accessed 27 October 2021.

rhythmic movement of the melody follows the movement of the syllabic setting of the text. In the musical realization of the text, sometimes a steady flow of rhythm may be broken to stress the semantic units. This is particularly evident in the treatment of the final syllables of verses. The duration of these syllables is extended to demarcate the textual and semantic boundaries. For example, the model melody, *Tuyay Badmūt Hešōkā* has four verses in the strophe with two semantic units. The first two verses form the first semantic and syntactic unit, and the next two form the second unit⁷. The Malayalam version of this melody is given below.

First unit:

Pulariyil nidrayuṇarnnangē/ Waking up at dawn, to thy/

Pāwana sannidhiyaṇayunnu/ Holy presence [I] come.

Second unit:

Kaṛttāwē nin karuṇakkāy/ O Lord, for your mercy.

Nandi paṛaṇṇu namikkunnu / In gratitude [I] bow.

FIGURE 1. Rhythm of Malayalam version of the model melody, *Tūyay Badmūt Hešōkā*. The pauses at the end of measures 4 and 12 coincide with the semantic flow of the text. Based on a rendering by Fr. Abel Periyappuram, CMI.

The semantic closures at the end of both units are expressed through a longer duration of notes for the final syllables (see Figure 1). In this case, the length of syllables is not a reason for the prolongation of the notes because the final syllables in both units are the same ("nnu") and are short (they have a short vowel, "u").

Yet, as seen in the transcription, these syllables are sustained longer than the final syllables in the first and the third verses. The final syllable in the first unit gets the duration of a quarter-note, followed by a quarter-note rest, and the syllable at the end of the strophe gets the duration of a half-note.

4. *Kyānāyā*: The Impromptu Mode of Melody Making in Syriac

One of the Syriac musical repertory's unique features is the mode of making melodies referred to as *kyānāyā*, which means "natural." *Kyānāyā* is not a fixed melody as in *Rēš Qālā*, but one that comes naturally to a singer. It is a way of applying musical pitches in articulating mostly prose texts. In a way, the singer composes/gives shape to the melody while singing. The goal of the singer is to articulate the syllables and express the meaning of the text correctly. The three most common types of texts that call for *kyānāyā* are scripture readings, prayers (*slōlā*) that are in prose, and any verse that does not follow the conventional metrical structures in Syriac poetry.

In the *kyānāyā* mode (manner) of melody making, the singer must be aware only of three things:

⁷ See the Syriac text in Bedjan ([1938] 2002: 35-36). For an audio recording of the melody in the voice of Fr. Abel Periyappuram, CMI, see Aramaic Project-11 https://youtu.be/SKFUdi8_G1k (30:15). Accessed 29 October 2021.

the relative length of the syllables, the semantic units, and the cadences to indicate phrase endings.

Kyānāyā serves the purpose of chanting the entire liturgy, moving smoothly from prose texts to poetic texts, making the entire service sound like a single cantata. The best example is the Solemn Qurbana of the Syro Malabar Church from the Syriac era. Here, one can hear a smooth and seamless transition from prose texts to poetic texts.⁸

Musically, the process is open-ended. The melody varies from individual to individual, performance to performance, and from context to context. It could be simple or elaborate, straight or ornamented, depending on the singers' mood, musical capability, and time availability. Individual variations are inevitable. The primary concern is not melody or rhythm but a solemn and proper articulation of the text's meaning. Albeit individual freedom in the performance practice of *kyānāyā*, the melody stays within a limited range, from a third to a perfect fifth, often in the middle register. We rarely hear a performance that employs the full range of an octave. More often than not, the third degree in the scale is minor. The approach to the final note may be either from above or below. Thus, the practice of *kyānāyā* provides the singers with the freedom to embellish the liturgy by employing their musical talent outside the context of established melodies.

A particular rhythmic structure does not bind the melody in *kyānāyā*. The rhythm is free-flowing. The singer determines the caesura and cadences at the end of a sentence or semantic unit. Sometimes, the *kyānāyā* rendering of a particular prayer by an accomplished musician may become popular enough for other singers to emulate. Even in that case, an individual singer has the freedom to lengthen or shorten a syllable or add neumes to mark boundaries of semantic units. We have not come across a performance that employs melisma.

Similar to other Syriac chants, the *kyānāyā* melodies existed in oral transmission. The use of any notation is not widespread. There have been only limited attempts to notate individual performances of *kyānāyā* melodies for propagation, learning, or standardization. Heinrich Husmann made a staff notation of three sloṭa-s from the evening prayer in his *Die Melodien des Chaldaischen Breviers Commune* (Husmann 1967: 109, 111, and 116). However, there is no evidence of using this notation to learn the melody by anyone in the Syro Malabar Church.

Categories of Syriac chants in the Syro Malabar Church

1. Chants from the *Hudra* (liturgy of the Hours for the entire year)
2. Chants from the Solemn celebration of Qurbānā (Eucharistic celebration)
3. Chants from Raza ("Mystery"), the most solemn form of Qurbānā
4. Chants from the Requiem Qurbānā
5. Syriac translation of Latin chants
6. Chants from funeral services

⁸ See several examples in Aramaic PROJECT-119. <https://youtu.be/8Qilz383dss>. Accessed 3 July 2021.

1. **Chants from the liturgy of the Hours:** the search for the earliest melodic patterns of Syriac chants may lead us to this category of chants. From the point of view of texts, the *Hudra* ("cycle," book of the Hours for the entire year) contains several poems by St. Ephrem the Syrian (d. 370) that bear witness to the theological thinking before the era of major Christological controversies. From the musical perspective, the melodies are relatively simple and are conducive to communal singing. Most of the chants are strophic. The melody of the opening strophe serves as the melodic and metrical model for the rest of the strophes. Most chants have a limited melodic range from a minor third to a perfect fourth or a perfect fifth; more often than not, the third degree of the scale is minor. Melodies with the range of a full octave are almost absent. Also, the chants have a syllabic (one note for a syllable) setting. In some instances, there may be neumes to demarcate semantic units. Melismatic chants are sporadic. Although authorship of some of the chant texts is available, we do not know the names of most melodies' composers. The melodies of the *Hudra* remained vocal without any form of instrumental accompaniment. The choir leader established the initial pitches in the middle range so that the entire community could sing comfortably.

2. **Chants from *Rāzā*, the most solemn form of Qurbānā.** According to Dr. Varghese Pathikulangara, CMI (1993), a specialist on Syro Malabar liturgy, *Rāzā* is a creation of the Syro Malabar Catholics in Kerala. Fr. Pathikulangara could not specify the period when it happened. The assumption is that it happened during the pre-Portuguese era, i.e., before the sixteenth century. The difference between *Rāzā* and the solemn form of Qurbana is in the liturgy of the Word. For example, there are several additional rituals, for example, the kissing of the Cross by the entire congregation, the solemn Gospel procession, and an elaborate ceremony of kissing the veil (in the middle of the church). These rituals include special chants. The chant texts for these rituals are in popular Syriac poetic meters and follow the system of *Rēš Qālā*. All the melodies have a syllabic setting. There are no melismatic melodies in *Rāzā*. The texts and melodies of these chants originated in Kerala. The audio CD, *Qambel Maran: Syria Chants from South India* (See Palackal: 2002) includes four chants from this category (tracks #10, #11, # 12, and #13). Track # 13 employs the *kyānāyā* mode of singing.

It may be worth recalling here that Syriac literacy was high among the St. Thomas Christians in Kerala until the seventeenth century. We have at least one historical witness to this in the works of Fr. Chandy Kadavil (1588-1673). Fr. Kadavil had enough mastery of the Syriac language to write an acrostic hymn in Syriac. The hymn is a poetic homily on the theme of the Eucharist. The Portuguese missionaries admired his talents and gave him the nickname Alexander the Indian⁹

3. **Chants from the solemn celebration of Qurbānā:** The solemn celebration of Qurbānā is also a remarkable musical event that lasts for about ninety minutes. The vast music repertory in this category also happens to be a witness to the different phases in the history of the St. Thomas Christians. There are multiple styles of melodies and rhythmic patterns. There are melodies with strictly syllabic settings and those with elaborate melismatic ornamentations. In between, there are prose texts that are chanted in the *kyānāyā* mode. The manner of the recitation varies from

⁹ See more details at <http://www.thecmsindia.org/kadavil-chandy-kattanar>. Accessed 3 July 2021.

celebrant to celebrant, depending on his musical capability. The melodies show influences from such varied sources as Gregorian Chant and Indian music.

The style of instrumental accompaniment is another unique feature of the solemn Qurbana. The most commonly used instruments are violin, harmonium or pedal organ, triangle, and bass drum. Often the instrumental players, all-male, also did the singing. The melody instruments doubled the vocal melody; the violin player rarely played a harmonic phrase or a counterpoint. Also, the harmonium player would occasionally play a chord. Overall, the music remained heterophonic. The use of harmony in the vocal melody did not exist. Choral singing was not prevalent.

The St. Thomas Christians followed the East Syriac liturgy in the Chaldean rite until the middle of the seventeenth century. In the absence of archival data, we may assume that the St. Thomas Christians sang the melodies associated with the liturgical texts that originated in West Asia. The encounter between the Portuguese missionaries substantially influenced the musical worldview of the Syro Malabar Catholics. The Portuguese missionaries did not approve of many of the liturgical practices of the St. Thomas Christians. They persuaded the St. Thomas Christians to reform the liturgy. The solemn Qurbānā is a testament to those reformations. The Syro Malabar Catholics adopted specific liturgical texts from the Latin rite in Syriac translation. Two examples are the Gloria at the beginning of the Mass and the *Agnus Dei* before Communion. Instead of borrowing the original melodies of the Latin texts, the local musicians in the Syro Malabar Church composed new melodies for the translated texts. In the process, they adapted many elements from the local musical traditions, such as rhythmic patterns.

The introduction of such rhythmic instruments as bass drum and triangle influenced the melodic structure of the chants. As a result, there came to be more chants in such meters as 2/4, 3/4, 4/4, 6/8, and 7/8. The last two deserve special mention. Although 6/8 meter is prevalent in Western art music, the internal structure of that meter (1-2 + 1-2-3-4 = 6) with accents on the first and the third beats is more akin to the *Rūpaka tāḷam* in Indian classical music. Similarly, the 7/8 rhythm, which is not very popular in Western art music, follows the structure of the *Miśra chāpu tāḷam* in Indian music (1 2 3 + 1 2 3 4 = 7) with accents on the first, fourth, and sixth beats.

Many musically talented priests in the Syro Malabar Church seem to have been fascinated by the melody of the Latin chant, *Exsultet* from the Easter Vigil Service in the Roman rite. They either sang Syriac texts to the melody of the *Exsultet* or appropriated the melody to chant the Syriac prose texts. For example, in the Aramaic Project-25K¹⁰. Fr. Sebastian Sankoorikkal uses the melody of the *Exsultet* to chant the concluding prayer in the Syriac solemn Qurbānā.¹¹

Until the sixteenth century, church architecture used to be simple in structure with a thatched roof. There were no statues in the church but only granite crosses. The Portuguese missionaries introduced a new way of building churches in the manner they were used to in Europe. Gradually, the St. Thomas Christians adopted baroque architecture for their churches. The wooden reredos on the altars became a venue for an exhibition of highly ornate, often gilded,

¹⁰ See Aramaic Project-25K at <https://youtu.be/O12ArUEXi0U>

¹¹ See one example at Aramaic Project-25K <https://youtu.be/O12ArUEXi0U>. Accessed 3 July 2021.

artworks. These artworks included paintings and wood carvings of heavenly scenes with angel musicians, saints of the Roman Catholic Church, and even handsome men in European military uniforms. Angel musicians play such Western musical instruments as the violin, trumpet, bugle, harp, drum, flute, and triangle.¹² Among these instruments, the violin appears much more frequently than others. It would seem that the strategy of the Portuguese missionaries to use a visual medium to influence the way of thinking of the local Christians about liturgy and music worked in their favor. At the time of their representations in Kerala, the images provided a semblance of the future rather than a reflection of the present. It also was an indirect invitation to break away from the past by adopting these musical instruments and the religious rituals from the Roman rite (see Palackal 2004:159-161). Gradually, violin, triangle, and bass drum became part of the Syriac choirs in the Syro Malabar churches. In subsequent centuries, we see a complete transformation of the ideal sonority of [Syriac chants](#).¹³ Also, veneration of saints became a part of the religious piety in these churches. Chants in honor of the Roman-rite saints were translated into Syriac from Latin and composed anew in [Kerala](#), sometimes employing indigenous musical idioms.¹⁴

The study of music iconography in Christian churches in India is important for Christian music historians and historians of music in India. Such a study might pose many challenges to music scholars. For example, the history of the violin in India may have to be pushed back from the British period to the Portuguese period, starting from the sixteenth century. The violin that one of the angels plays on the main altar of my native parish at [Pallippuram](#), near [Cherthala, Kerala](#), has five strings. We do not know if it resulted from oversight of the artist or if such violins were prevalent in Kerala. The layers of cultural interaction between [India](#) and the Christian West may have had far-reaching implications in Indian music. The transformation of the violin as an essential instrument in [South Indian classical music](#) is but one example.

4. Chants from the requiem Qurbana. The St. Thomas Christians adopted the custom of offering Qurbana for the deceased from the Latin rite of the Portuguese missionaries. The liturgical text remained the same except for the selection of psalms and concluding prayers. These prayers were chanted with simple melodic formulae, without melismatic ornamentation or instrumental accompaniment. The celebrants used the *kyānāyā* mode to chant prose texts. The melodies had a limited range of a minor third to a perfect fourth.

5. Syriac translations of Latin chants. The time of the introduction of images, statues, and musical instruments in the churches of Kerala coincides with the adaptation of paraliturgical services from the Latin rite. The most popular among them are Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, novena to saints, and *ladīn* (Malayalam adaptation of the Portuguese word, *ladainha*, meaning "litany"). These services had their repertoires of chants in the Latin rite. In introducing these chants in the Syro-Malabar churches, however, language became a bone of contention. Since the Syriac Christians were unwilling to give up their liturgical language, the missionaries

¹² See images on <http://www.thecmsindia.org/music-iconography>. Accessed 1 November 2021.

¹³ See examples on tracks # 01, 21, 22, & 25, on **Qambel Maran: Syriac Chants from South India*, in [Palackal](#), 2002).

¹⁴ See a Syriac hymn in honor of St. John Nepomucene on Aramaic Project-51M <https://youtu.be/hLzqFSfUxZk>. Accessed 1 November 2021.

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. A few examples of Latin chants that were translated into Syriac for the use of the Syro-Malabar Catholics are given below.

- i. *Veni Creator Spiritus* (Come O Spirit Creator)¹⁵
- ii. *Te Deum Laudamus* (Praise to Thee God)¹⁶
- iii. *Salve Regina* (Hail Queen)¹⁷
- iv. *Pange Lingua* (Praise, my Tongue).¹⁸
- v. Litanies of the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Joseph, and Sacred Heart of Jesus.

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 on the part of the foreign and indigenous priests.

It is not clear 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 *tālām* with accents on the first and the third beats, and the seven-beat *tālām* 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 of the transcriptions include instrumental introductions, interludes, and short links between phrases.^[14] 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 measures of introduction and a 24-measure interlude.

7. **Chants for funeral services.** The funeral services of the Syro Malabar Church retained the melodies that originated with the Syriac texts. Many of these texts and melodies might have originated in the Chaldean Catholic Church in the Middle East. However, over time, these melodies took a life of their own in Kerala in pronunciation of the text, style of vocal inflection, and ornamentation. Several melodies employ melismatic ornamentation at the end of the final vowel sound of verses or verses. Most of the chants in this category have a syllabic setting. There are a few chants that employ extensive melisma that heightens the emotive effects. Each service uses many different melodies

¹⁵ See an example on Aramaic Project-10C <https://youtu.be/IUdJB5ywAgk>. Accessed 1 November 2021.

¹⁶ See the Malayalam version of this chant on Aramaic Project-212 <https://youtu.be/PCof1svr58w>. See melody of this chant on Aramaic Project-52R <https://youtu.be/qDtfaNfQc2g>. Accessed 1 November 2021.

¹⁷ See Palackal (2002: track # 24).

¹⁸ See the Syriac version of this chant and one of the several melodies, on Aramaic Project-51B <https://youtu.be/kbESnTYqO6k>. Accessed 1 November 2021.

that also add to the musical variety. Two melodies from this category of chants deserve special attention: Qambel Māran (“Receive O Lord”) and *Ēdā Pūš Lēk(y) Baš Šlāmā* (“Remain in peace O Church”). Both chants are from the services for the dead. The first, *Qambel Māran*, is a Madrašā (didactic chant) from the Office for the dead. It consists of three strophes of four verses each.¹⁹ The second, *Pūš Lēk Baš šlāmā*, is from the funeral services for priests in the Syro Malabar Church (Palackal 2016: 340-360).

Both chants have a syllabic setting with melismatic ornamentations on the ultimate vowel sound of the phrases or verses.

Survival of Syriac melodies in the vernacular

The Syriac melodies of the Syro Malabar Church have a continuing history. In the second half of the twentieth century, the Syro Malabar Church decided to transfer the Syriac liturgy into the vernacular. Although Syriac literacy was part of the seminary formation of the clergy, the laity could not read or write in Syriac. During Qurbana in Syriac, the congregation sang relevant songs in Malayalam or engaged in such pious activities as reciting the rosary. The first step was preparing a bilingual Qurbana in Syriac and Malayalam, which is the language of Kerala, home to most of the Syro Malabar Catholics. The liturgical committee published the first bilingual *taksa* (missal) in 1962. In it, the orations for the celebrant were in Syriac. Prayers and responses for the congregation were in the vernacular. The hymns, too, were in the vernacular. At this stage, all celebrants said the Institution Narrative in Syriac.

Interestingly, the Syriac Qurbana's vernacularization started in the 1950s, over a decade before the Second Vatican Council. The clergy continued to be Syriac literate and recited the Hours and other services in Syriac. The ripples of the enthusiasm of the Second Vatican Council toward the promotion of local cultures in liturgy reached Kerala without much delay. The head of the Syro Malabar Church, Joseph Cardinal Parecattil was an active participant in the Council. After returning to Kerala, the Cardinal decided to initiate the process of vernacularizing the Hours and the funeral services of the Syro Malabar Church. Cardinal Parecattil commissioned a talented priest from the religious congregation of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI), Fr. Abel Periyappuram, CMI (1920-2001),²⁰ to embark on the project. Fr. Abel knew Syriac yet sought assistance from a great Syriac scholar and grammarian from his congregation, Fr. Ludovic Kunianthodath, CMI (1888-1979).²¹ First, they worked on the funeral services. Fr. Kunianthodath would explain the nuances of the source text, and Fr. Abel would transfer it into the poetic format.

Early on, Cardinal Parecattil and Fr. Abel arrived at a decision that had a far-reaching influence on the history of Syriac music in India. They decided to retain the original Syriac melodies in the

¹⁹ See note on track # 14, in Palackal (2002: 10). See an example of bilingual (Syriac and Malayalam) singing of this chant in Aramaic Project-57 https://youtu.be/RDI0PEvJb_0. See the text, transliteration, and translation in the digital *Encyclopedia of Syriac Chants* <http://www.thecmsindia.org/qambel-maran>.

²⁰ See more on Fr. Abel at <http://www.thecmsindia.org/personalities/fr-abel>. Accessed 29 October 2021.

²¹ See more details on <http://www.thecmsindia.org/personalities/fr-ludovic-kunianthodath-cmi>. Accessed 29 October 2021.

vernacular version. It meant that Fr. Abel had to adjust the translated text to the meter and melody of the source text in Syriac. Fr. Abel had to transfer the theology, thought process, and prosodic patterns that originated in a Semitic language to the target text that followed a Sanskrit-Dravidian language's syntax rules. Fr. Abel accepted the challenge.

It may be worth remembering that the Chaldean Catholic Church in the Middle East that shares the Syriac same liturgy went through a similar process. However, their task was easier than that of Fr. Abel; they transferred the text from Syriac to another Semitic language, Arabic, which happened to be their native language.

The prophetic value of Cardinal Parecattil's decision comes to light when we examine the fate of the Gregorian chants of the Roman Catholic Church. Had the Latin church followed a similar path, the Gregorian chant repertory would have acquired multiple lives in different world cultures.

The choice of Rēš Qālā

At the outset, Fr. Abel had to make a major decision on the melodies that he would use for the Malayalam version. The *Hudra* is a treasury of Syriac melodies that survived the test of several centuries. After much deliberation, Fr. Abel decided to choose twenty-four model melodies from a plethora of melodic options contained in the Syriac chant repertory. Here is the list of model melodies that Fr. Abel employed. Transcriptions in staff notation of the Malayalam versions of chants 1-19 in the list below can be found in Palackal (2005: 162-178).

Titles of model melodies in Malayalam and Syriac

1. Pulariyil / Tūyay
2. Ulakin nāthā / Brīk hannānā
3. Kaṇṇīrāru tarum / Sahdē brīkē
4. Narakula rakshakanām / Eṭpan al slōtā□
5. Santatamuyarunnen / Yādā hūšāwē
6. Wiṭaru m pularika! / Sahdē waitōn
7. Ellāmaṛiyunnu daiwam / Īšyā daw remšē
8. Ewīteyoḷikkum / Laykā Ēzal
9. Kālwarimalayil / Ēramrammāk
10. Winayānwitanāy / Pūš Bašlāmmā
11. Gadsēmaniyil B'endān Saprā
12. Unnata wāniṭamē / Al Madbah Qudšā (Sahdē qandišē)
13. Paramōnnatamām / M'sīhā Pārōqē
14. Amalōlbhawayām / Esthappānōs
15. Sāyam kālamaṭukkunnu / K'tāwā Rambā□
16. Paralōkattin / Mānāy Hādē
17. Nin kalpanaka! Māryā Kolhōn Hāwbay
18. Karuṇā nilyanamē / Šāmā U'lāmāhmē
19. Swātānṭṛyattin / Māran Āsē
20. Anutāpikaḷe kaikkoḷwān/ Handā Nawšē
21. Annoru diwasam / B'hadmin Yawmin
22. Wayalilppularum / Lā Tekarē Lāk
23. Maṭṭyanu raksha / Baslōs Kēnē

- Bedjan, Paul, ed. [1938] 2002. *Breviarium juxta Ritum Syrorum Orientalium id est Chaldaeorum*. Rome: Sacrae Congregationis "Pro Ecclesia Orientali."
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FIGURE 2. Syriac and Malayalam versions of the model melody, *Eṭpan al Slōṭā*

Figure 2 shows that in spite of the considerable difference in the syllabic structure of the two versions, the melody is almost identical. The total durational values of the melodies are almost the same in both versions. Also, both melodies use the same number and nature of pitches (C-D-E-F) and have the same final, D. Overall, the original melody of the Syriac text has been kept intact in the Malayalam version.

A more detailed comparison of the Syriac and Malayalam versions of the chant, *Ēdā Pūš(y) Lēk(y) Bašlāmā* (“Remain O Church in Peace”), from the funeral services for priests in the Syro Malabar Church, can be found in Palackal (2016: 346-354). In this sample, too, there are considerable differences in the syllabic structures of the Syriac and Malayalam versions of the chant, but the melody is almost the same. These examples indicate that the process of retention and transmission of text and melody followed two different paths. The vernacular version shows greater fidelity to the original melody than to the meaning of the original Syriac text.

Reclaiming Syriac Chants to Reaffirm Identity: A North American Story

A new chapter is evolving in the history of East-Syriac chants among the expatriate Syro Malabar communities in the English-speaking parts of the world. As a test case, we shall review the recent developments in North America. It all started in 2013. The India Catholic Association of North America decided to schedule, for the first time, the Syro Malabar Qurbana as part of the celebration of the annual pilgrimage to the Shrine of Our Lady of Velankanni in Washington D. C. on 7 September 2013. The Association accepted the suggestion of the Christian Musicological Society of India to use the English version of the solemn Qurbana with the musical setting by Fr. Joseph J. Palackal, CMI, and George Thaila.²⁴ It was an experiment in bilingual (English and Syriac) Qurbana. The celebration took place at the Cathedral and Basilica of the Immaculate Conception at Washington, D. C. The head of the Syro Malabar Church, Major Archbishop Cardinal George Alencherry, graced the occasion by being the celebrant. The celebration included two chants in Syriac: *Puḡdānḡōn*, the introductory dialogue between the celebrant and the congregation,²⁵ and *Qandīšā Alāhā* (the Trisagion),²⁶ The special choir for the occasion consisted of, 120 young singers, from different Syro Malabar Communities in the USA. This was the first opportunity for the American-born Syro Malabar youngsters to get acquainted with Syriac chants. A new conversation on Syriac chants and Syriac heritage started among the youth who participated in the celebration. Gradually, Syro Malabar pastors approved the inclusion of one or two Syriac chants into the celebration of Qurbana on Sundays. The choir members use the resources available on the digital library of the Christian Musicological Society of India. In some

²⁴ See more information at <http://christianmusicologicalsocietyofindia.com/solemn-high-mass-in-english>. Accessed 29 October 2021.

²⁵ See a video recording of the chant from the mass at Aramaic Project-65 <https://youtu.be/lv1PkmTUITA>. Accessed 30 October 2021.

²⁶ See a video recording at Aramaic Project-65 https://youtu.be/aJnk78G_bX4. Accessed 30 October 2021.

churches, such special celebrations as First Communion includes children singing the famous Christological hymn *Sagdīnan Mār* and the Lord's Prayer in Syriac.²⁷

The positive conversation on Syriac chants during the celebration at the Basilica became an additional source of inspiration to embark on the Aramaic Project (www.aramaicproject.com) under the auspices of the Christian Musicological Society of India. The digital library of the Society documents the Syriac activities of Syro Malabar Catholics around the world and is a source of information on the various aspects of Syriac chants. Gradually, the Society intends to expand the digital library to serve other Syriac churches in Kerala and abroad.

Currently, several Syro Malabar communities in America sing the Resurrection Hymn (*Lāku Mārā*) and the Trisagion (*Qandīšā Alāhā*) in Syriac. Ironically, the younger generation is more at home with singing Syriac chants. They do not seem to have the mental inhibition and emotional apathy their parents have toward Syriac chants. Some of the youngsters see this as a way of connecting with the history of their forefathers; they also see it as a means of reclaiming their identity. If this trend continues, the nature of Syro Malabar liturgy might change considerably in the distant future. The advantage is that the next generation will be able to learn theology through chants. In the Syriac era, liturgical texts also served as catechetical tools. The prime examples are the Christological chants,

By singing Syriac chants, the Syro Malabar youth will alter the linguistic sound map of North America and other English-speaking parts of the world and also contribute to preserving an intangible cultural heritage of humanity. It is possible that in the distant future, the sound of East Syriac may fade from the memories of the Syro Malabar Catholics in Kerala and survive among the expatriate communities in other parts of the world.

Conclusions

The Syriac heritage of the Syro Malabar Church is an essential component of the cultural fabric of India and a part of the linguistic heritage of the world. The Syriac language and music took a life of their own in India by adapting to the host country's culture and adopting local musical practices. The tolerant attitude prevalent in India toward guest cultures and peoples played a significant role in the survival of the guest cultures in the land, and in return, enriched India by adding to the linguistic soundscape and cultural complexity in India. As a result, there is an implicit invitation to re-imagine India as a country that continues to preserve the sounds, memories, melodies, and thought processes overlaying and underpinning the ancient Aramaic language. The underlying process in transforming and preserving the Syriac music traditions in India is a world cultural phenomenon that deserves more scholarly attention.

The successful transference of melodies that originated in a Semitic language to the translated texts into the semantic and syntactic structures of Malayalam, a Sanskrit-Dravidian language, is yet another unique cultural phenomenon. In retrospect, the hierarchy and clergy of the Syriac churches in India deserve credit for doing something that the Roman Catholic Church did not. After the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church almost relinquished its age-old Gregorian chant tradition. In contrast, the Syriac churches of the St. Thomas Christians in India

²⁷ See Aramaic Project-21 <https://youtu.be/1aJfXolHjbc>. Accessed 30 October 2021.

decided to retain the ancient Syriac melodies and adjust the translated text to the source melody. Thus, the Syriac churches preserved a musical treasure.

The ancient Syriac music traditions in India expand the mental map of early Christian music geography. Along with their Malayalam versions, Syriac chants belong to a *Padhati* (Sanskrit, "System") with its unique principles of melody, rhythm, and performance practices. For that reason, Syriac chants may be elevated to a third system of music in India, besides the Karnatak and Hindustani systems. Historians of Indian music can no longer ignore the presence of such a complex music system.

The survival story of Syriac chants shows that melody takes precedence over text as a marker of identity. In the second half of the twentieth century, the St. Thomas Christians relinquished their attachment to the "language of Jesus." Nonetheless, they held on to the melodies that they were used from the distant past. Thus, Syriac melodies provided a sense of continuity and comfort. In effect, the St. Thomas Christians achieved something that the Portuguese missionaries attempted but failed to suppress the Syriac tradition.

Since 2013, the Christian Musicological Society of India has played a significant role in spreading awareness of the uniqueness of the Syriac heritage. The digital library of the Society contains an extensive collection of audio recordings and videotaped interviews. These resources are available in the public domain. Statistics show that many people around the world are accessing these resources and expanding the conversation. Also, the positive attitude toward the Syriac heritage among the youth in expatriate Syro Malabar communities in the English-speaking parts of the world leaves us hoping that the Syriac melodies might live for at least the next few generations.

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