Ritual and Music in South India: Syrian Christian Liturgical Music in Kerala
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RITUAL AND MUSIC IN SOUTH INDIA:  
Syrian Christian Liturgical Music in Kerala  
By  
Israel J. Ross

This study is concerned with the rituals and musical practices of the Syrian Christian communities of the southwestern or Malabar coast of India. These communities have lived and flourished in South India for almost two thousand years and were almost completely isolated from cultural contacts with outside groups until the sixteenth century, when the Portuguese invaded the Malabar coast. Yet they have maintained an essentially Middle Eastern musical tradition, uninfluenced by Hindu classical music or Indian folk music. In addition, the congregational singing of the Syrian Christians of Kerala shows a marked preference for the style of singing which we call organum.

Syrian Christians strenuously resisted the attempts of the Portuguese Christians to dominate and change their traditional rituals, and have remained independent of the various denominational traditions which remained in the wake of the Portuguese, Dutch, and British occupations of Kerala. In view of this isolation and resistance to change and influence, it is possible that the Syrian Christian liturgical and musical tradition has retained many of the characteristics of the earliest Christian musical rites of the Middle East. Since the influence of the Jewish synagogue on the early Christian church was strong, it may be illuminating to compare the rituals of the Syrian Christians with those of the Jews of Kerala, with similar roots and a parallel history.

Kerala, a narrow but fertile strip of land on the Malabar or southwestern coast of India, has been the hub of the East-West trade route and the home of a number of communities with different cultural and religious backgrounds for thousands of years. Hindus, Christians, Jews, Arabs, Moslems, Parsees, and native tribes have lived side by side in an unusually peaceful co-existence under a system of laws and rules of behavior called keralamaryada. The Syrian Christian community is one of the largest in the state of Kerala, and one of the most influential political groups, along with the Hindu majority.

Rituals and Customs

As mentioned above, the history of the Syrian Christian community in many respects parallels that of the Jews of Kerala. Like the Jews of Cochin (a coast city with one of
the principal ports in South India), whose culture and social life has always revolved around the synagogue, the focus of Syrian Christian culture and social life is the church and its rituals and the rites of passage of the family. Consequently, the musical expression of the Syrian Christians is almost totally concerned with the rituals of church and home.

Many of the customs and rituals of the Syrian Christians are similar to those of the Jews of Kerala. This is particularly true of the rites of members of the Malankara Knanaya sect, those Syrian Christians who claim to be descendants of the original followers of Thomas of Cana. Kinship ties are close in the Syrian Christian community, as they are in the Jewish, Hindu, and Moslem groups. The head of the family is called kanaravan. He is the village chief and is also head of the property group or clan, makes the important decisions, and, along with other elders of the household, has the final say in the choice of bride or groom (Gough 1961:334). After the marriage is arranged, a dowry is presented at the bride's home, with a levy of two to seven percent given to the church. These sums are always in odd numbers for good luck (Pothan 1963:66). At the marriage ceremony itself, the bride wears two gold chains around her neck and a cloth veil called manthrakodi. The bride stands on the right side and two rings are placed on the bride's and groom's fingers, both customs believed to be derived from Jewish Temple rites (Pothan 1963:67). Then follows the blessing of the crowns, a tradition which is derived from a Syrian Palestinian rite. Then the tali, a gold chain ornament, is placed around the bride's neck and the husband ties the knot. This custom, also followed at the Cochin Jewish marriage, is still the central part of the Hindu Brahman wedding ceremony, and, in South India, seems to be derived from the pre-puberty rite of the matrilineal Nayars called talikettukalyanam, or tali-tying ceremony (Gough 1961:328).

At their wedding ceremony, Knanaya Christians use a special canopy for the celebration at home. This has been compared to the huppa, the ritual canopy at the Jewish wedding (Vellian 1973:73). After the tali-tying ceremony described above, the couple drinks from a special ritual cup. On the eve of the marriage there takes place a ceremonial bathing ritual by the couple, a custom which has been likened to the miqva, the purifying bath of the Jews (Vellian 1973:74).

At the birth of a first child, the wife returns to the parental home. If a son is born, the occasion is heralded
by the custom of kurava, a shrill cry of joy, produced with fingers in mouth, as is done by Oriental Jewish women on joyous occasions (Vellian 1973:74). The horoscope of the child is then printed in Malayalam (the Kerala vernacular) on a Palmyra leaf. Honey mixed with a little gold dust is then sprinkled on the child to ensure prosperity. When the husband's family visits the child with gifts of gold, care is taken that there be an odd number of guests, since an even number brings bad luck. The education of the infant begins at age three or four, and writing instruction starts shortly thereafter. Consequently, the literacy rate in this group is one of the highest in Kerala.

Several other customs among Syrian Christians are said to be derived or adapted from ancient Jewish traditions. At the conclusion of the mourning period of forty days after someone dies, a ceremony ends with the kaiyyamuthu ("the kissing of the hand of the priest"). This ritual is similar to the "Kiss of Peace," kaiyyasoori, observed by the author at the conclusion of the Holy Mass, which is passed from bishop to priest to worshipper. According to Pothan (1963:75), this custom is derived from a similar ritual of the Jews. Also, a blessing given to his children by a father on his deathbed follows rather closely the text of the abot benediction of the amida, which is the central group of prayers in the Jewish service:

Syrian Christian

God gave his blessing to Abraham, Abraham gave that blessing to Isaac, Isaac gave that blessing to Jacob, Jacob...to my forefathers, My forefathers...my parents, And my parents...to me, Now, dear son (daughter), I give that blessing to you.

[Mathew 1973:74]

Jewish

Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, and God of our fathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob, the great, mighty and revered God...

Several customs associated with Maundy Thursday and Good Friday have been compared to the traditions of the Jewish Passover festival. A ritual meal following the ordinary meal includes the eating of unleavened bread, a special coconut-milk drink, and the singing of hymns. After ritually washing his hands, the head of the family says grace, and distributes the unleavened bread, which he has broken, to each member of the family, and care is taken that none falls to the ground. The next morning, there is alms-giving to the poor, and on Good Friday the juice of a bitter herb is drunk. All these traditions are believed to have originated in the rituals of the Passover festival (Vellian 1973:74).
In this analysis of Syrian Christian music, reference will be made to the chant, accentuation, mode, rhythmic and melodic motives, followed by a discussion of organum as sung by the Syrian Christians of India.

Chant Accentuation

The Syrian Christian accentuation system was instituted by the Syrian Masoretes, a group similar to the grammarians in Tiberias who codified the system of non-diastematic (non-intervallic) signs for Hebrew cantillation of Biblical texts in the ninth century C.E. (Segal 1953:143; Avenary 1963:10). The Syrian Christian system is a dot notation above, below, or on either side of the words of the text, paralleling the Palestinian dot system of the Jews, which was later incorporated into the Tiberian ekphonetic notation. This development took place between the fifth and tenth centuries C.E. (Avenary 1963:8). The names for these signs give an indication of the expressiveness that characterizes Syrian Christian Bible reading and Chant style, names like wondering, supplicating, calling, weeping, and warning (See Table I).
### TABLE I: Table of Accents

#### 1. Syriac Accent (5th to 6th Century)
According to Segal 1953:64

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accent</th>
<th>Syriac</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. mī'šā'lanā</td>
<td>מִשְׁלָנָא</td>
<td>interrogative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. paqoda</td>
<td>פַּקָּדוֹ</td>
<td>commanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. egyana</td>
<td>עִנְצָה</td>
<td>resisting, compelling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. thachsa</td>
<td>תֵּכָסָה</td>
<td>reproaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(E) zoga claya</td>
<td>זֹגָה</td>
<td>upper pair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. rahta</td>
<td>רַחְתָּ</td>
<td>running</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. methdarmrana</td>
<td>מֶחְטָרְמָה</td>
<td>wondering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. mīnalatha</td>
<td>מִנְלָתָה</td>
<td>causing to descend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. samka</td>
<td>סָמָקָ</td>
<td>support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. pasoqa</td>
<td>פָּסּוֶּקָ</td>
<td>breaking off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. claya</td>
<td>עֵלָי</td>
<td>upper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. thalithaya</td>
<td>תַּלֵּי</td>
<td>lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. shwaya</td>
<td>שָׁוֵי</td>
<td>level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(E) zoga</td>
<td>זֹגָה</td>
<td>pair</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Probably belonging to this period:

a. mī'galyana | מִגָּלְנָ | praying |

b. methkashfana | מֶחְטָקְשָף | supplicating |

(E) marks East-Syriac equivalents of Western accent names. Syriac letters replaced by Hebrew letters.

#### II. Examples of Syriac Accentuation (7th to 10th Cent.)
The numbers refer to the related accents in the above table.

**East**

(Segal 1953: 86 & 115; 89; 118)

- What is the offence of Jacob? *m'qimnana (Causing to stand)*, a late combination of 3 and 8.
- How are fallen the mighty? *thabthaya (lower)*.
- Nay my lord, man of God, (do not he unto thine handmaid.) *shwaya (level)*.

**West**

(Segal 1953:124; 135; 140)

- And God said: Let there-be light *m'vachyana (Causing to weep)* is found since the late 7th century.
- And Jacob said: O God of my father Abraham God of my father Isaac.

(From Avenary: 1963:9)
It is perhaps significant in tracing the history of neume notation, that the names of two disjunctive Syriac accents, those marking the ends of the two clauses of the verse, are almost identical to those of the two primary disjunctives of Hebrew cantillation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hebrew Sign</th>
<th>Syriac Sign</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sop</td>
<td>pasuq</td>
<td>pasoqa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>etnahta</td>
<td>m'nahta</td>
<td>'causing to descend'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Syriac poetry is isosyllabic, that is, all verses of the strophe have an equal number of syllables (Werner 1959: 215). Although this may lead to an expectation of metered chanting, this is not the case since Syriac, like Hebrew, has an unequal accentuation with one, two, or three unaccented syllables preceding the accented syllable and sometimes one unaccented syllable following:

' - ' - ' - ' or ' - ' - ' - '

Until recently, the Syrian Christian liturgy in India was chanted in Syriac, an Aramaic dialect, spoken in Syria until replaced by Arabic. Today, under pressure of modernization and reform, and also the need to clarify the liturgy for an ever increasing population, much of the service is in Malayalam, the state language of Kerala. This, of course, alters the accentuation of the chant somewhat.

Mode

Syrian Christian liturgical music is sung in modes which may be said to correspond to Arabic maqamat, or, more precisely, if the hypothesis of early settlement by Syrian Christians in India proves to be correct, a system prevalent in the Middle East at the beginning of the Common Era. There has been much speculation about the Syrian Christian Oktoechos, referred to in Medieval treatises on the early Christian liturgy. Of the many interpretations of this early modal system, the opinion that the Oktoechos consisted of a number of favored melodic formulae, or risquole, similar to the Hebrew ta'am hammiqra ('neumes'), seems most reasonable.

Syrian Christian chant in Kerala is sung in two modes: kadmoyo, equivalent to Arabic bayat (Gr. Phrygian; Ecc. Dorian) and hamisoyo, equivalent to Arabic rast (Gr. Lydian; Ecc. Ionian).
When the melody falls below the 'tonic' in bayat, another mode is briefly touched on, that of Arabic siga or aug (Gr. Dorian; Ecc. Phrygian):

In some of the choral chants there is a free alternation of major (rast) and minor (bayat) motives:

The augmented 2nd, a frequently used interval in Arabic maqamat as well as in Indian raga, is unknown in Kerala-Syrian-Christian liturgical music. This is also true for Cochin-Jewish liturgical music. The intonational element in Indian-Syrian-Christian chant is noticeably free of microtonal alteration, as was previously noted by Bonvin (1918) for Syrian chant in the Middle East. The ranges of the melodic motives comprising the modes rarely exceed the ambitus of a 4th:

Motivic Analysis

a) Melodic motives

The solo recitation of the precentor in Syrian-Christian chant is the source for the melodic motives used in responsorial and antiphonal song. The units of the chant melody derive from the initial motive, the recitation tone, and the cadential motives (see example 1). The initial motive is always in an upward direction, and may have the variations:

The recitation tone is usually on the 3rd, but may sometimes be taken up to the 4th, then descends to the 3rd:
The mediant cadence that separates the two clauses of the verse is either in a downward direction or in a down-and-up direction with the mediant cadential tone on the 2nd or 3rd:

The closing cadence for the verse is invariably a descending pattern:

while the motives for the strophic cadence end with a finalis on the 3rd, thus serving as a tonal bridge from one stanza to the next:

Another consequence of the rising strophic cadence is that there is a continuous shifting of the tonal center, creating a floating effect.

Less frequent motives that appear in solo recitation at various times are those that have wider range, and motives that lie below the tonal center. These are more melismatic and resemble some of the more elaborate Hebrew cantillation and prayer motives:

Motives for the responses and antiphonal chants are derived from the solo chant motives of the precentor, as shown above. In the hymn sung in Syriac before the start
of the *orbana* ('prayer for the sacrifice'), initial i, mediant 2, and cadential 3, solo chant motives are shown (Ex. 1).

Some individual hymn tunes are more elaborate, have a larger range (sometimes as much as a major 9th), and establish a regular beat and a definite although irregular metric structure (Ex. 2 and 3).

b) The rhythm of Syrian Christian chant is logogenic, that is, governed by the metric structure and accentuation of the verse. Syrian Christian solo chant is in the flowing, free rhythmic, non-metrical manner termed 'punctuation style' by Avenary (1963: Chapter IV). Choral chant melody, on the other hand, is dominated by spondaic anapestic, and dactylic metric patterns. The style is still 'punctuation' but there is a more definite beat in choral chant that approaches song character and regular metric grouping (Ex. 1).

**Organum in Syrian Christian Music**

Organum occurs in the congregational singing of responses, antiphons, or hymn tunes. This phenomenon has also been observed in the congregational singing of three diverse and isolated groups: the Yemenite Jews, the Cochin Jews, and the Hebrew Samaritans (Spector 1970, 1973). Organum in the South Indian Syrian Christian chant is sung either in duplum or triplum. In duplum it is sung at the 5th when the two parts are carried by boys' and men's voices, with the cantus in the upper voice. Curiously, this gives an illusion of organum at the 4th, since the boys' voices are in their low register while the men are in their high register (Ex. 4). Organum occurs at the 4th when either group sings alone (Ex. 5). In triplum, the organum is always at the 4th and octave, with the high and low voices carrying the cantus (Ex. 6). Of course, as may be imagined in a loosely structured oral tradition, there is much magadizing ('singing in octaves'), although some tunes seem invariably to provoke singing in organum.

**Summary**

Ritual and music form a close relationship in the life of the Syrian-Christian community. Similarities between the rites and customs of the Syrian Christians and the Jews of Kerala reflect a possible common origin in the ancient Middle East, and serve as heuristic evidence in support of the historical claims of both communities.
Although the musical expression of the two groups has diverged in form and style, enough similarities exist to show their common heritage in Middle East tradition. The presence of organum singing in the Syrian-Christian service sheds new light on this musical phenomenon and compels a re-evaluation of traditional musicological ideas on this subject.

Example 1: mode - *kadmoyo*, Ar. *bayat* on g♯
meter: non-metric
range: e-c♯, hexachord.

Syriac Hymn, before the start of the Qrbana

Recitation motives
Example 2: mode: hamishoyo, Ar. nawa
meter: polymetric
range: c-c, octave.

Syriac Song - extended hymn tune
Example 3: mode: *kadmove* , Ar. *bayat*
metre: non-metric
range: 9th, c#-d, with transposition

Welcome Song in Syriac

Melismatic Hymn

91
Example 4

Organum duplum at the 5th - Song for unction of the sick

Example 5

Organum duplum at the 4th

Example 6

Organum triplum
NOTES

1. The term "Kerala" has been identified with the Sanskrit kera ('coconut'), one of the staple products of the region. It may also derive from the Tamil charal or Malayalam cherala, meaning mountain slope. An early king of Malabar was named Keralaputhra. The modern name for the state was assumed after Indian Independence in 1947. The State of Kerala is an amalgamation of three kingdoms: Cochin, Travancore, and Calicut.

2. Keralamaryada is a code of conduct and rules of behavior based on chivalry, tolerance, and a scrupulous regard for the rights and obligations of every caste. It came into being as unwritten law ca. 1000 C.E. It was, however, modelled on the ancient Dharmasastras, or moral codes, similar to the North Indian "Laws of Manu" (Ayyar 1966:3).

3. The Kerala tradition has it that St. Thomas of Edessa came to Malabar in 52 C.E. and converted a number of Brahmins. The Jews came en masse in 70 C.E. after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. Both Jews and Christians settled in or near Cranganore (formerly named Muziris by the Greeks and today known as Kodungallur), then the principal port on the Malabar coast, and both sects were granted rights and privileges inscribed on copper charters (still possessed by the Jews of Cochin) by Malabar kings, according them a high rank in the South Indian caste system.

4. The past tense i.e., revolved, is used for the Jews of Kerala because constant migration from Cochin to Israel took place from 1950 on, until, in 1973 when this study began, only ten families (about 60 members) remained in Cochin.

5. A Syrian-Christian sect which claims direct descent from the followers of Thomas of Cana, or Knayi Thoma, who arrived in Cranganore in 345 C.E. with a group of four hundred Christians, sent by the Patriarch of Antioch to revitalize the faltering Church of India (Mathew 1973:74).

6. The wearing of gold chains by the Jewish bride has been observed and described by Johanna Spector, who attributes the custom to a Yemenite tradition (verbal communication).

7. The Jewish tradition is described by Rabinowitz (1952: 142 ff.).
8. Gold chains are substituted at present (verbal communication from Father Thoma).

9. The Qrbana (from Heb. Qrbanot) prayers are associated with the sacrifices of the Jewish Temple.

10. The Syrian Christian service is intense and dramatic. The chant, in its solo, responsorial, and antiphonal forms interprets the texts of lessons, prayers, and hymns with affect and emotion. This differentiates it from the didactic reading of Jewish Biblical cantillation but resembles the more expressive chant of Samaritan recitation. In this context, Indian-Syrian-Christian chant would seem to be a survival of the chant practiced by the Syrian Christians of the Middle East during the early Christian era and codified by the Medieval Syrian Masora. In its written form, the ekphonetic notation of the Middle Ages specified emotive phrasing such as wondering, supplicating, weeping, etc. However, the service as observed in India today has a more generalized atmosphere. It is punctuated at important points of the Holy Mass by the shaking of sistrum-like rattles (the name could not be identified) fastened to the ends of long poles. The Mass itself ends on the most dramatic note of the service, with a display of fireworks in the courtyard together with prolonged and loud ringing of church bells.

11. See Reese (1940:71-75) for further details; also Werner (1959:373-409).

12. Although the general aural impression of Syrian Christian chant is that it is non-microtonal, electronic measuring of the hamisoyo mode with the stroboscope (Stroboconn) at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York reveals the intonation of the two main intervals to be consistent with the Middle Eastern maqam rast-nawa:

\[ \text{\textbf{205}} \quad \text{\textbf{184}} \]

The two intervals are almost identical with the Pythagorean major tone (204) and the minor tone of Just Intonation (182), and in rast-nawa would correspond to nawa, hussaini, and aug (g, a, b).

13. This refers to singing in parallel 4ths, 5ths, and octaves. Apel defines organum as "the earliest type of polyphonic music, from the 9th till the mid-13th century" (Apel 1962). This definition and Apel's
narrow classification (Ibid.) has to be amended to include evidence of organum singing prior to the 9th century, as well as today among such widely dispersed singers as Yemenite Jews, Samaritans, Cochin Jews, Turkmenistan singers, and Syrian Christians of Kerala. A tentative classification would include the following:

1. Undifferentiated parallel organum: singing in 2nds, 3rds, 4ths, 5ths, and octaves, within an oral tradition, characteristic of Yemenites and Samaritans.

2. Differentiated parallel organum: singing in 4ths, 5ths, and octaves:
   a) Within an oral tradition (Syrian Christian).
   b) By prescribed notation (Ninth century organum).

3. Contrapuntal organum: singing in parallel, oblique, and contrary motion.

14. Ravina (1963) has attempted an explanation and a re-evaluation of organum singing that merits serious consideration. He places all types of parallel singing under one broad category which he terms polytonic. This includes organum, or singing in 4ths, 5ths, and octaves; gymbel, or singing in 3rds; faubourdon or singing in parallel 3rds and 6ths; magadizing, or singing in octaves; and the practice of Yemenite and Samaritan congregational singing in 2nds, 3rds, 4ths, 5ths, and octaves. Ravina believes that parallel singing from different tonics arose naturally because of the varied voice registers in choral singing and is an unconscious rather than a learned or trained phenomenon. However, several points in Ravina's hypothesis are questionable. His choice of the term polytonic is unfortunate, since it is easily confused with the term polytonality, which has harmonic and contrapuntal connotations. He classifies Samaritans, Yemenites, and other groups who practice parallel singing as musically "primitive." This labelling is unjustified both from a musical and a historical viewpoint and places his entire analytical procedure in jeopardy. Moreover, the grouping of all parallel singing under one head indicates a visual analysis of the material rather than an aural analysis.
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Spector, Johanna


Vellian, Jacob

Werner, Eric
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Cantillation Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Pentateuch Cantillation - Jewish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Prophets Cantillation - Jewish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Chant - Syrian Christian, simple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Chant - Syrian Christian, elaborate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Rigvedic Chant - Hindu</td>
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