ENTANGLED LITERARY GENRES IN SYRIAC FROM MALABAR IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE SYNOD OF DIAMPER (1599)

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Entangled Literary Genres in Syriac from Malabar in the Aftermath of the Synod of Diamper (1599)

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ABSTRACT During the second half of the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth centuries, the Syriac literary heritage of the Malabar Christians shifted from a standard East Syriac ("Nestorian") canon of texts to a Catholic post-Tridentine literary output in Syriac, a fusion of Western (Latin) and Middle Eastern (Syriac) sources and elements. The present article analyzes the literary networks of the community of the Malabar Christians, as expressed in the production of Syriac texts undertaken by the Catholic missionaries and arguably their Indian Syriacist pupils. The period under investigation is around the time of the Synod of Diamper (1599), a turning point in the ecclesiastical history of Malabar. The synod marked the Portuguese's attempt to impose Tridentine Catholicism on the Malabar Christians and ordered to correct their Syriac books according to Catholic Orthodoxy or burn them as heretical. My paper focuses on the relationship between (1) collections of sermons and (2) liturgical poetry, since these two are entangled literary genres. Occasionally Syriac sermons (translated from Latin or composed on the spot by Catholic missionaries) were replicated in liturgical poetry and show the chains of transmission of Syriac knowledge from Catholic teachers (especially Jesuits) to their Indian students. Such relationship between literary genres comes clearly to the fore in the case of prose compositions coming arguably from the Syriacising circles of Francisco Ros, the first European Bishop of the Malabar Christians (1601–1624), and newly discovered pieces of Syriac poetry which might have been written by his Indian disciple Alexander the Indian/Kadavil Chandy Kattanar (1588–1673). The groups of texts under discussion show the transfer of knowledge from both the Latin West and the Syriac-speaking Middle East that created a new theological literary culture for the Malabar Christians as an expression of the Jesuit missionary principle of *accommodatio*. Source analysis of such texts allows one to dive into various aspects of the ecclesiastical and confessional life of the Malabar Christians, and into the cross-cultural encounters between them and the Catholic missionaries.

KEYWORDS Religious and cultural transfers in Malabar, intellectual history, Syriac studies, Jesuit studies, early modern global Catholicism, liturgical poetry, collections of Syriac Catholic sermons

Introduction

The second half of the sixteenth century witnessed manifold transformations in the religious life of the Malabar Christians from South India. Up to that time, the functioning of the ecclesiastical structures of the local Christian community—known as 'Saint Thomas Christians' and claiming Syriac identity—depended highly on bishops consecrated and sent to the Malabar Coast by the Catholicos Patriarch of the Church of the East, from Iraq. As Heleen Murre-van den Berg emphasizes, since the end of the fifteenth century "after almost two centuries of near isolation, the Church of the East in Mesopotamia was reconnected to the wider world; its clergy started to travel and influences from outside began to impact upon its internal development" (Murre-van den Berg 2015, 23). In this context, the contacts between the Church of the East and the Indian Church from the Malabar Coast "were resumed in the late fifteenth century, testifying to the important fact that, in this period, the Church of the East was being reintegrated into a global network of political and ecclesiastical contacts" (ibid.). Since 1553, when the 'Uniate' counterpart of the Church of the East, the Chaldean Catholic Church, was created, both the East Syriac and the Chaldean Patriarchs sent metropolitan bishops to Malabar and contended for their own jurisdiction over the South Indian Christian community. According to the same scholar, in the context of renewed contacts and communication between the Indian Church and the East Syriac Christians from Iraq, the creation of the Chaldean Catholic Church in the Middle East "seems to have been stimulated as much by the 'pull-factor' of a Roman Catholic presence in India as by the 'push-factor' of the incumbent [East Syriac] patriarch's misconduct" (Murre-van den Berg 2015, 47). In 1552, the abbot of the Rabban Hormizd Monastery (near Alqosh, in Iraq), John Sulaqa, revolted against the existing Patriarch, Simeon bar Mama, and went to Rome, where he made a Catholic profession of faith and was re-ordained and appointed Catholicos Patriarch by the pope in the spring of 1553 (on this matter, see Murre-van den Berg 2015, 44–54; Beltrami 1933). [1]

In competition with the East-Syriac and Chaldean bishops coming from Iraq to India, the Portuguese, present in Malabar since the end of the fifteenth century, attempted to control the religious life of the Malabar Christians by cutting off their connection with the Syriac Iraqi prelates and by imposing on them Tridentine Catholicism. A process of 'Latinization,' carried through by the Catholic missionaries active in the area during the second half of the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth centuries, had two main objectives. The first one was to achieve Catholic Orthodoxy in terms of doctrine, rites, and jurisdiction by uprooting the Syriac identity of the Malabar Christians and purging their Syriac books from what the Catholic missionaries considered "Nestorian" heresy (in this sense, the Syriac language was often regarded by the European missionaries as a vehicle for heresy). The second objective was to suppress many of the social and cultural customs and practices which the Malabar Christians adopted as a result of their interaction with and integration into the local society of Malabar. Examples include the observance of the rules on purity and untouchability, the practice of charms, magic, and divination, the participation in the festivals of their non-Christian neighbors, and the adoption of the dress, appearance and habits of the Nayars by the Malabar Christians (an overview of these customs are listed in the Ninth Action of Acts of the Synod of Diamper entitled "On the Reformation of Manners;" see Da Cunha Rivara 1862, 488-519). [2]

These two tendencies are mirrored in the decrees of the Synod of Diamper (1599), a turning point in the history of the Malabar Christians, which also placed this Christian community under the direct authority of the Latin archbishop of Goa. Yet, the Syriac rites and language [3]

in the liturgy as well as many of the local social customs were part of the identity of Malabar Christians, and the missionary strategies used by the Catholic clergy among them needed to be refined. In order to make their missionary enterprise efficient, the missionaries (especially the Jesuits) felt the need to negotiate the borders between social and religious customs and practice, and to redefine them in the light of the local multicultural and multireligious society of Malabar (see Županov 1996). They also adjusted the Catholic dogma, theological discourse and European erudition to the East Syriac tradition of liturgy and theology. This East Syriac tradition formed a rich corpus of literature that reached the Malabar Coast through the repeated contacts of the Malabar Christians with the Middle East (see Perczel 2018, 2015). As shown by Ines Županov, it is through their interaction with the Malabar Christians that the Jesuits elaborated for the first time their missionary strategy of "separating the social from the religious" and of developing "a permissive and flexible attitude towards the diversity of the pre-Christian social customs" (Županov 2005, 287–88), a strategy conventionally known in secondary literature as the principle of *accommodatio* (see Županov 2005). The importance of the Jesuit mission and of the practice of *accommodatio* among Malabar Christians has been substantiated and analyzed by Antony Mecherry in his work *Testing Ground for Jesuit Accommodation in Early Modern India: Francisco Ros SJ in Malabar (16th–17th Centuries)* (see Mecherry 2019). Mecherry analyzes the practice of *accommodatio* promoted by Francisco Ros, the first European Archbishop of the Malabar Christians, among the South Indian Christians, and stresses that the Jesuit prelate was as important for the practice of *accommodatio* in the Early Modern Catholic missions in Asia as other prominent missionaries, such as Alessandro Valignano in Japan, Matteo Ricci in China, or Roberto de Nobili in Tamil Nadu (Mecherry 2019, 431). In Mecherry's words:

> Given the dilemma faced by the missionaries, namely an underlying conflict between the faith that they wanted to import to India and the local culture that resisted such imports, Malabar turned out to be the primary testing ground of the Jesuit accommodation. […] The Jesuit praxis of accommodation was a "a way-out" approach promoted by Francisco Ros and Roberto de Nobili in their attempt to respond to the local resistance of the people of Malabar. In this process, Ros appeared as a Chaldean in terms of his imitation and appropriation of the traditions of the Malabar Church and Nobili appeared as a high-caste sage in terms of his imitation and appropriation of the customs and symbols of the Brahmins of Madurai. While Ros […] tried to perpetuate the Syriac language and the Indo-Oriental format of the Malabar Church, Nobili presented the Catholic religion before his potential converts as a universal faith that was compatible with their cultural symbolism. (2019, XXXI) [4]

As an expression of this complex missionary context, during the second half of the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth centuries, the Syriac literary heritage of the Malabar Christians shifted from a standard East Syriac ("Nestorian") canon of texts to a Catholic post-Tridentine literary production in Syriac, a fusion of Western (Latin) and Middle Eastern (Syriac) sources and elements (see Perczel 2009). While, with one exception,[1] Syriac manuscript evidence from Malabar does not date earlier than the sixteenth century, in the sixteenth century, when substantial Syriac manuscript evidence from Malabar is available, Syriac emerges [5]

1 The exception is MS Vaticanus Syriacus 22 copied in Šēnglē, in 1301; see on it Van der Ploeg (1983, 187–89).

as the liturgical language of this Christian community, being endowed with prestige as the sacred language of the learned priestly elite (see Perczel 2018, 193–95). The Syriac literary output conducted in Malabar under the agency of the Catholic missionaries during the second half of the sixteenth and first decades of the seventeenth centuries is an important witness to the literary networks of the community of the Malabar Christians at that time. It encompasses various literary genres, such as sermons and homilies, liturgical poetry, theological treatises, commentaries, translations, and original creations (Perczel 2009, 295–317). Source analysis of such texts allows one to explore various aspects of the ecclesiastical and confessional identity of the Malabar Christians as well as the cross-cultural encounters between them and the Catholic missionaries.

[6] Besides announcing the discovery and emphasizing the importance of several such Syriac Indian compositions from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Malabar, pioneering studies by István Perczel have shown how the cosmopolitanism of the Arabian Sea facilitated the circulation of Syriac texts from the Middle East to the Malabar Coast. In Malabar, through the agency of the Jesuit missionaries, the Syriac Middle Eastern culture met the theological erudition of the Latin West, leading to the creation of this new original Catholic culture in Syriac based on European, Middle Eastern and local sources from Malabar (Perczel 2015, 2009). Perczel also showed how this newly created literature in Syriac, stimulated mainly by the Jesuit missionaries and their Indian disciples, was intended as a means of *accommodatio* in the context of a controversy about the Chaldean rite analogous to controversies about other rites in Asia, and is thus of crucial importance for understanding early modern Catholicism and the history of Catholic missions in a global perspective (Perczel 2018, 2014).

[7] Within the same theoretical framework, in the following paragraphs I would like to focus on a special case of textual *accommodatio*[2] that reveals this missionary strategy among the Malabar Christians as an enterprise shared by Catholic missionaries (most likely the Jesuits) and arguably their Indian Syriacist disciples. The central point of my analysis is the entanglement between two literary genres in Syriac from the second half of the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth centuries—namely (1) prose sermons and (2) newly discovered liturgical poetry—since occasionally Syriac sermons (translated from Latin or composed on the spot by Catholic missionaries) were reused or replicated in liturgical poetry. As I will try to show, the study of these two groups of texts together is an important witness to the amalgamation of the East Syriac heritage of Malabar Christians and Indian Catholicism as promoted by Western Catholic missionaries. Such texts also illustrate the chains of transmission of knowledge from the Jesuit teachers to their Indian pupils.

Syriac Catholic *Paideia* and the Collections of Syriac Catholic Sermons from Malabar

[8] Most of the Syriac texts that I will discuss henceforth belong to the Syriacist circles of Francisco

2 Whenever I am using the term 'textual *accommodatio*' in this paper, I refer to a degree of flexibility that favoured the adaptation and the hybridization between the European Catholic tradition and the Syriac literary culture of the Church of the East, as this tendency is reflected in the production of new Syro-Catholic theological texts from Malabar. I am not implying that at an early stage of the Catholic mission in Malabar the missionaries had a preconceived plan of *accommodatio*, nor am I trying to project way back into the sixteenth century a more elaborated system of *accommodatio* as it was later developed in the Madurai mission by Roberto de Nobili. I would like to thank Paolo Aranha for his advice on this methodological matter.

in the first and, to a certain extent, third stanzas of the Syriac canticle of glorification. The reference to Christ as (ܛܘܒܟܘܢ) [Syr. *ṭubkun*] "your blessing" in the first verse of the canticle (but absent from the Latin hymn) is the lexical element meant to connect Christ as *antítypos* to the blessings from the Land of Promise; these motifs were incorporated into the canticle through the mediation of the sermon quoted above. However, the contribution of the Roman Breviary to the composition of Syriac canticles of glorification is quite limited; after a systematic search through it, the only example analogous to this one that I found is the Syriac canticle for the feast day of Archangel Michael (no. 20 in the list above). It was composed by adapting a Latin vespers hymn for the feast day of the "Apparition of Saint Michael the Archangel" (*Apparitio Sancti Michaelis Archangeli*); the Latin hymn begins with the words: *Te splendor, et virtus Patris/ Te via, Iesu, cordium,/ Ab ore qui pendent tuo,/ Laudamus inter Angelos* (*Breviarium Romanum* 1854, 324).

Here I have presented a structural connection detected between the canticle of glorification for the feast of the Transfiguration of Christ and a sermon for the same feast day from the Malabar Sermonary. The same structural connection can be observed between the canticle of glorification written for the commemoration of Saint Thomas the Apostle, and a sermon for the same feast day from the Malabar Sermonary. [69]

The canticle of glorification for the Commemoration of St. Thomas the Apostle

MS Paris Syriac BnF 25[54] fol. 218v–219v—Text and Translation:

❖ ܡܪ ܝܫܘܥ [55] ܕܟܠܗ ܒܝ ܡܫܡܫܢܐ [70]

1. ❖ ܐܡܐ ܫܒܚܘ ܒܥܠܝ ܕܐܦ ܒܪܝܬ ܕܟܠ ܐܬܪ ܘܟܠ ܐܬ[56]ܬܐ [71]
❖ ܕܒ ܗܘ ܠܟ ܒܟܠܗ ܕܟܬ ܒܟܒܐ ܕܐ ܒܟܠܗ ܕܥܕ ܒܥ
❖ [57]ܒܟܟ ܒܙܟ ܕܟ ܒܥܒܝ ܒܥܡܐ ܒܥ ܕܟ ܒܥ ܒܥ ܒܥ ܒ
❖ ܒܐ ܒܥ ܒܥ [58]ܒܥ<ܒ> ܒܥ ܒܥ ܒ

2. ❖ ܒܙ [60]ܒܥ ܒܥ ܒ ܒ ܒ [59]ܒ ❖ [72]
❖ ܒ ܒ ܒ ❖ ❖ ❖

4. ❖ܠܗܘܡܝܗ ܕܝ ܢܡܕ ܟܡܒܫܐ ܕܡܕ ܡܟܟܐ ܒܝ[63]ܠܗܕ [74]
❖ܠܗܘܒ ܒܢܡܒ ܒܟ ܟܟܕ ܡܕܐ ܡܥܟܘܒ
❖ܠܗܘ ܡܟܡ ܡܒܝ ܡܟܟܐ ܡܒܟܟ ܡܟܡ ܘܗܒ
<❖>ܠܗܕ ܒܝ ܘܒ ܒܢܒ ܠܗܕ<ܕ> ܡܟܒܟ ܟܡ

5. ❖ܡܢܒ ܟܟ ܡܥܒ ܢܒ ܒܕ ܡܡܒ ܡܥ[64]ܠܗܕ [75]
❖ܡܟ ܟܟ ܘܗ ܡܘ[66] ܒܗ[65] ܡܡ
❖ܡܟ ܡܟ ܒܢ ܡ[67]ܡܒ ܡܒ ܡܡ
❖ܡ[68] ܒܢ ܡܡ ܡܡ ܡܡ ܡܡ

6. ❖ܠܡܡ ܒ[69]ܠܗܕ [76]
❖ܠܡ ܡ ܡ ܡ ܡ ܡ
❖ܡ ܡ ܡ ܡ ܡ ܡ
❖ܡ ܡ ܡ ܡ ܡ ܡ

7. ❖[72]ܠ[71] ܡ[70]ܠܗܕ [77]
❖[73]ܠ ܡ
❖ ܡ[75] [74]ܠ
<❖>ܠ ܡ

1. Come, sons of India, pupils of the apostle Thomas: [78]
the light of the world, the shepherd of the Church, its great treasure,
whose history is sublime and cannot be comprised in the speech of men,
and comely is the beauty of his story, which is wonderful.

2. Through a sign of the Spirit, Thomas came to the country of India, [79]
And he built up a palace according to a craft which cannot be comprehended.
The king rejoiced, got baptized by his hand and venerated the Apostle,
And many peoples in all India bowed their heads [to him].

3. Through his humility and ineffable renunciation, [80]
Thomas the Apostle preached the word in the whole earth;
he diligently subjected kings under the yoke of the Cross,
and they dismissed [their] crowns, renounced [their] scepters, and venerated the Cross.

4. A leopard killed the assailant miraculously [81]
and a dog brought his right hand in front of [all] at the wedding feast.
All the guests were astounded and chanted praises, while the king believed,
according to the *typikón* of the resplendent Church of India.

63 In rubrics: ܠܗܕ.
64 In rubrics: ܠܗܕ.
65 Em. ܒܢ; P ܒܢ.
66 Em. ܒܗ; P ܡܗ.
67 Em. ܡ ; P ܡ.
68 Em. ; P .
69 In rubrics: ܠܗܕ.
70 In rubrics: ܠܗܕ.
71 Em. ; P .
72 Em. ; P .
73 Em. ; P .
74 Em. ; P .
75 *Coni. quid ni* ?; P .

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