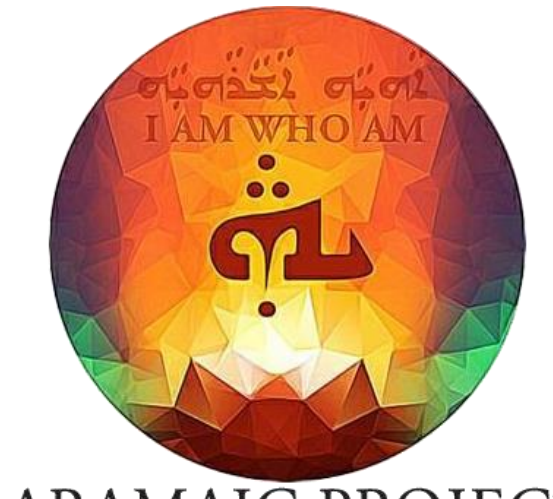


ARAMAIC PROJECT

Syncretic Syriac Culture of the St. Thomas Christians before 1500 AD.

(LRC Seminar 60 - 28 January, 2022)

Dr. Joseph J. Palackal, CMI.

We are embarking on a journey into the distant past in the history of the St. Thomas Christians in Kerala. We do not have a clear roadmap for this journey. Our forefathers were not enthusiastic about leaving much documentary evidence of their life and activities. However, they liked to sing and narrate stories and occasionally dance to them. As a result, a rich oral tradition and a handful of material objects are all that we have to reconstruct the period under our consideration. For that reason, we may take a diachronic approach to traverse uncharted territory. We may start from the present and dive into the deeper recess of the past. This will be a reverse chronological approach. Along the way, we may have to draw heavily from the writings of foreign visitors to the land. We may never know how far these foreigners were biased in their eagerness to record the history unfolding in front of their eyes. Our tool will be informed imagination. We shall employ all the available data to imagine what else could have been there.

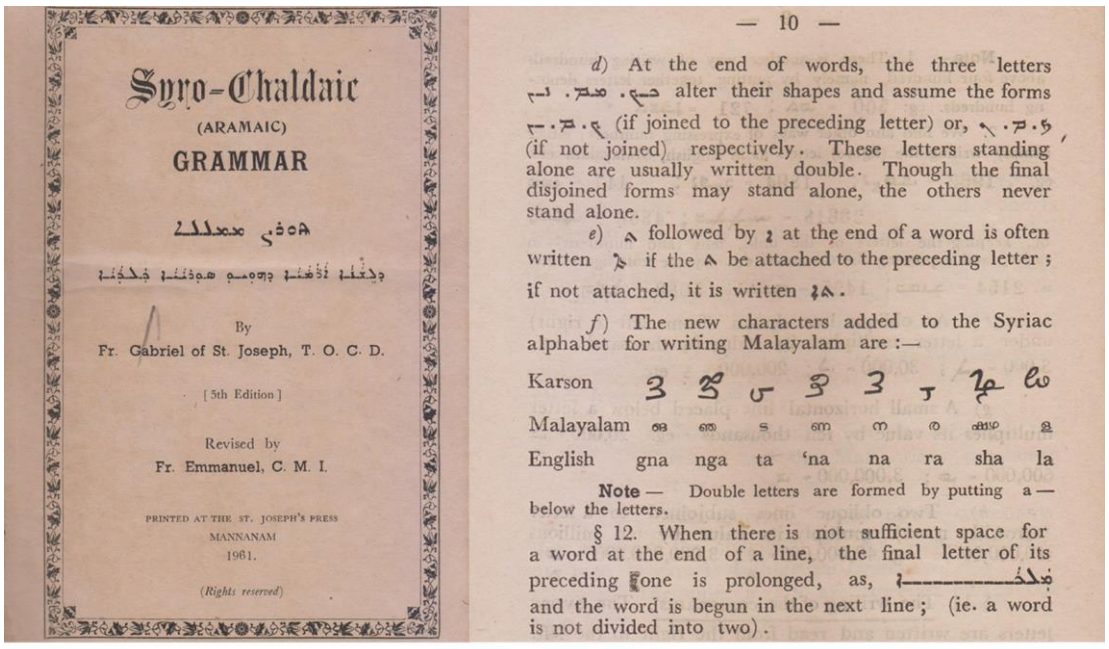
There are three parts to this presentation. The first part's focus will be on the status of the Syriac language. Here, we shall explore the extent of Syriac literacy among the Christians in Kerala, how the Christians held on to an Aramaic way of thinking, and how the non-Christians responded to the Syriac language and culture. In the second part, we shall examine the unique features of the Syriac music repertory of the Kerala Christians. The third part will focus on the ecumenical dimension of the Thoma Mārggam, and how it served as a survival strategy for organic growth of Christian faith in the multi-religious milieu of South India.

So, let us start part 1 from Broadway at Ernakulam.



Shops with English Name Boards at Broadway, Ernakulam

This photo was taken two weeks ago at Broadway, a busy commercial street at Ernakulam. The photo shows the signboards of the shops. The language of Kerala is Malayalam, but the signboards publish the name of the shops in English.



Syro Chaldaic (Aramaic)Grammar by Fr. Gabriel of St. Joseph, T.O.C.D.
5th edition, revised by Fr. Emmanuel Thelly, CMI (Mannanam,1961).

Page 10 from the ***Syro Chaldaic(Aramaic) Grammar*** by Fr. Gabriel of St. Joseph, T.O.C.D. 5th edn, revised by Fr. Emmanuel Thelly, CMI (Mannanam, 1961). Addition to the characters of Syriac alphabet to write Malayalam.

Syriac in liturgy

There is no dispute among the scholars regarding the use of the Syriac Anaphora of Mar Addai and Mar Mari, the earliest extant Anaphora in Kerala. At home, the Syriac Christians celebrated the Pesha meal once a year on Holy Thursday. The home ritual was referred to as "[Pesaha] Appam Murikkal, which is a literal translation of the biblical phrase "Breaking of bread." It is possible that before the evolution of ritualized liturgy, the early Christians in Kerala followed home liturgy similar to the practice of early Christians in Palestine and Antioch.

The liturgical terms that the St. Thomas Christians adopted into their vocabulary for conversations on religious matters testify to the Aramaic way of thinking. We shall examine two terms as examples: *Qurbana* and *Madbaha*.



While the Greek-speaking Antiochene Christians came up with Eucharistia to refer to the ceremony of Breaking Bread, the Syriac-speaking Christians used the Aramaic word Qurbana for the same event. The term Qurbana has a long history of usage. For example, in the book of Genesis, chapter four verses 3-6, the word appears three times in different forms about the sacrifice of Cain and Abel.

Similarly, the word madbaha comes from the root, dbah, which means to sacrifice. It has a direct connection to the altar for sacrifice in the Jerusalem temple and evokes stark images of blood, fire, smoke, the smell of burning carcasses and cereals, etc. Words such as these convey more than literal meanings; they also carry emotions as well as layers of meanings that accumulated over the centuries out of usages by different communities at different locations.

Old Testament names for children:
Local adaptations of Syriac words.

It seems Old Testament names are more popular than the New Testament names.

Aramaic names for children in Kerala

Syriac	Malayalam Names	Local Names
Abraham	എബ്രാഹം/അബ്രാഹം	Awara, Awaran, Awarachan, Awdo, Awadachan
Anna	അന്ന	Annamma, Annaumma, Annu, Annakkutty
Eli	ഏലി	Eliswa, Elizabeth, Eliamma, Elamma, Elikkutty
Eliazar	എലിയാസർ	Lazar
Mariam	മറിയം	Mariamma, Mariyaamma, Mariyakkutty
Mathai	മത്തായി	Matthappan, Mathu, Mathachan, Maathachan, Mathayichan, Mathukutty
Thomma	തോമ്മ	Thomman, Thommi, Thommachan, Thommikkunju
Yacob	യാക്കോബ്	Chacko, Chakkappan, Chackochan
Yawsep	യൗസേപ്പ്	Yawseppachan, Appachan, Ouseppachan, Pappachan, Pappu, Pappootty
Yohannan	യോഹന്നാൻ	Ulahannan
Yob	യോബ്	Yobachan
Zacharia	സഖറിയ	Scaria, Karia, Kariachan, Cheriyan, Cheriyachan, kuncharia, Kunchariyachan

It may indicate a Jewish background to the first Christian communities in Kerala. It is evident that Jews and Christians lived in harmony in Kerala and shared many social customs. Both communities enjoyed high social status in the society.

Syriac words in the context of family prayer

(outside the domain of official liturgy)
Aramaic Project-115 https://youtu.be/ValovwJzyoU

The following excerpt shows how Syriac words became part of family prayer vocabulary.



Here, we see an elderly couple making the sign of the Cross with the minor doxology before the Angelus. The minor doxology in Malayalam consists of four words; two of them are Syriac. The first and the third persons of the Trinity are referred to in Syriac: Bawa and Ruha d'qudsa. The second person is invoked as Puthran (a Malayalam adaptation of the Sanskrit Putr," meaning son). Interestingly, the Proto-Dravidian-Tamil speaking Christians in Kerala had already appropriated the Aramaic word Abba with a slight change in the pronunciation of the second syllable for a male parent as Appa. Instead of using Abba or Appa, the Christians used Bawa to distinguish God the Father from biological father.

The video also shows an example of greeting the elders in Malayalam, "praise be to Jesus Christ." In this greeting, Jesus Christ is referred to in Syriac, Iso Misha, the archaic Aramaic form instead of Yesu Christu derived from the Greek translation of the original Hebrew-Aramaic form. Until the introduction of West Syriac in Kerala, Jesus was always referred to as ISO and not Yesu. This was, in effect, a part of the Aramaic way of thinking. By using such words, St. Thomas Christians celebrated their intimate connection to the time and place of the Jesus event.

Interestingly, both these examples are the seamless juxtaposing of Aramaic and Malayalam words. What is more interesting is that the Syriac words are inflected according to the rules and syntax of

Conclusions

Christianity in India prior to the sixteenth century was a unique phenomenon. India holds a significant place in the Christian geography of early Christianity. Luckily, Aramaic Christianity in the original language of the Kerygma came to India and continues to preserve a few Aramaic elements. All the more important is that the Christian faith moved from west Asia to South Asia before Christianity was defined through the writings of the New Testament books in the Greek language. After reaching India, the Aramaic kerygma took a life of its own by adapting to the prevalent local Buddhist culture. The Buddhist term Marggam for the new faith is testimony to the faith's transformation in South India. More than a set of doctrines, the Jesus movement became a way of life in India. For those reasons, the Aramaic way of thinking can be considered a unique identifying factor of Indian Christianity until 1500.

The striking similarity in the conceptualization of religion as "way" or "way of life" among the followers of the Buddha and Jesus Christ deserves more scholarly attention. Both Buddhism and Christianity emerged from already well-established religions. St. Luke's narrative of the early Christian experience in the Acts of the Apostles presents the emerging new religion as *odos* (Gk., "Way") as in Acts 9: 2; 18: 26; 19: 9, 23; 22: 4; and 24: 14, 22. In Acts 9: 2, Luke refers to the followers of Jesus as "men or women who belonged to the Way." Regarding the Indian context, it is difficult to determine whether the similarity was a mere coincidence or whether it was mediated by St. Thomas the Apostle himself during his evangelization in India.

The prayer vocabulary of the St. Thomas Christians is probably the best testimony to the Aramaic way of thinking. Prayer vocabulary is the common man's encyclopedia of theology. The act of prayer along with accompanying actions are ways of celebrating the theology of a particular Church. For example, to the St. Thomas

Christians, the dogma of Trinity was less critical than the celebratory experience of the Trinity in everyday life.
The veneration of the Cross was an essential component of the Thoma Marggam. The Thoma Christians found ingenious ways to incorporate the veneration of the Cross into their daily life. By giving prime place to the spirituality of the Cross, they celebrated the theology of resurrection.
Although the St. Thomas Christians in Kerala do not own stories of a Christian Sankaracharya or a St. Ephrem, they have access to a proud patrimony of a sacred language, ancient liturgy, unique melodies, musical practices, distinctive religio-cultural conventions that connect them to a glorious past.
The design and execution of Raza, the most solemn form of Qurbana is a testimony to the creative genius of the Syro Malabar clergy. The rituals, melodies, and performance practices of the chants in the Raza are a noteworthy contribution of the Syro Malabar Catholics to the Christian world. It deserves more conversations among Catholic theologians than it has received in the past. Finally, the Syriac language, ancient liturgies, and music are part of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity; they add to the linguistic soundscape and cultural complexity in India. They also tell us the story of the resilience of a people in preserving what is dear to them against adverse circumstances and the zeal with which they passed them on to generations. While appreciating their contributions, the past generations of Christians in Kerala call us to transfer the torch to the next generation and the generation after.

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