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SYRIAC CHANT TRADITIONS IN SOUTH INDIA

PREPARED BY :

FR. JOSEPH PALACKAL, C.M.I.

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Music in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor Philosophy The City University of Newyork

2005

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Music in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

SYRIAC CHANT TRADITIONS IN SOUTH INDIA

by

Joseph J. Palackal

Advisor: Professor Stephen Blum

The Syriac chant traditions of the Chaldean and Antiochene rites reached South India at various stages in the history of the St. Thomas Christians. In spite of attempts by the Portuguese missionaries to suppress the Syriac tradition in the sixteenth century, and the voluntary efforts of the Syriac churches to vernacularize liturgies in the 1960s, the Syriac language and the musical styles associated with it have not only survived in oral transmission for centuries in South India, but also have retained their unique identity in a completely different cultural milieu. The dissertation focuses on the contemporary practice of the model melodies of the Chaldean rite in the Syro-Malabar Church and the *oktoēchos* ("eight voices") of the Antiochene rite in the Orthodox churches. The system of model melodies supports the practice of singing multiple texts in a specific poetic meter to a single melody, and the system of *oktoēchos* supports the practice of singing the same text in eight different ways.

A survey of the historical circumstances that led to the retention of Syriac chant traditions in India shows that one of the reasons for the resilience of the melodies is the

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resoluteness of the practitioners to perceive music also as an imaginary boundary marker between communities. The analysis of model melodies shows the presence of consistent melodic and rhythmic gestures that are coordinated with the semantic and syntactic structures of the text. The system of *eṭṭuniṟam* ("eight colors"), the local term for *oktoēchos*, exemplifies the transformation of a musical concept as a tradition is transferred from one culture to another. The model melodies and the *oktoēchos* employ a systematic body of musical knowledge that is applied as normative standards in composition and performance and, therefore, deserve to be included in the larger discourse on music in India. Also, the Syriac chants present a case in point for the musical proximity of otherwise distant regions and diverse cultures.

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To

Dr. Joseph Aquilina, M. D. P. C.

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Acknowledgments

This study would not have been possible without the contribution of many people. I shall mention only the names of a few and hold the others dear to my heart. I am grateful to Fr. Emmanuel Thelly C. M. I., grammarian and lexicographer of Syriac language, and Fr. George Kalappura C. M. I. for helping me in matters related to Syriac language and liturgical texts. In spite of his ill health, Fr. Thelly promptly responded to my persistent inquiries. My special thanks are due to Fr. M. P. George, professor of music and theology at the Syrian Orthodox Seminary at Kottayam, for teaching me the various aspects of the system of *oktoēchos*. I am grateful to Fr. James Chitteth, choir leader and professor at the Malankara Orthodox Seminary at Vettikkal for allowing me to stay at the Seminary and participate in the prayers so that I could directly experience *oktoēchos* in communal worship. Most Rev. Dr. Mar Aprem, Metropolitan of the Church of the East was kind enough to help me understand the history of his Church; Fr. Pauly Chirayath spent several hours singing for me the melodies of East Syriac liturgy of the Church of the East; and Mr. Wilson Muriyadan gave me extra copies of rare books in Syriac from his personal collection. My thanks are due to each one of them.

I am deeply indebted to Stephen Blum, my Advisor, for his care and consistent support. The topic of the dissertation took shape while I attended his classes on the music of the Middle East. I profited from his erudition on a vast array of topics. His insightful comments, critique, and queries helped me to expand the scope and improve the quality of the dissertation. I am solely responsible for all the insufficiencies and inaccuracies. My sincere gratitude to the two Readers, Peter Manuel and Leo Treitler, for their prompt

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reading of the drafts and for their very valuable comments. My special thanks to Peter Manuel for sharing information about my research with Stanley Sadie that led to the creation of a section on Christian music of India and another entry on *Mandó* of the Catholics of Goa in the current edition of the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. My special thanks to Leo Treitler for expanding my myopic view of Syriac chants to the experiences of other cultures and other times through his courses at the Graduate Center on Medieval musical practices in the Christian West and his comments on the chapters of the dissertation.

Barbara Hampton initiated me in writing about a Christian music genre of India, at Hunter College. While working on my master's thesis she spent many hours patiently correcting my writing style. I shall always be grateful to Barbara Hampton. My thanks are also due to the other members of the dissertation committee, Zacharias Thundy and Anne Stone, for their valuable time and comments. I want to thank all my professors at the Graduate Center and at Hunter College.

Irene Zaderenko was an unofficial reader of this dissertation. An "outsider" to the tradition of this music, she found the story interesting enough to spare many hours to do the difficult task of reading the first draft of the chapters. I am indebted to her for her comments and suggestions that helped me toward greater clarity in writing the story. My thanks to Joseph Cheruvelil for reading the earlier drafts of a few chapters and, as an "insider" to the tradition of the Syro-Malabar Church, making me feel that my writings about the music is a valuable undertaking.

I am specially indebted to Mathias Mundadan C. M. I., my professor and preeminent scholar of Indian Church history, for inspiring me to pursue research and,

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most recently, for reading and commenting on the draft of the first three chapters of my dissertation. My gratitude to Thomas Kalayil C. M. I. for enthusiastically encouraging me to pursue a career also as a singer and recording artiste. I would like to pay homage to Prof. N. V. Patwardhan, my Guru in Hindustani classical music, who introduced me to the idea of thinking about music. I cannot thank, but only pray the presence of my parents, Palackal Kurian Joseph and Rosamma Mathai Kochery, my first teachers in music, religion, and life. Finally, I dedicate this work to Dr. Joseph Aquilina M. D. P. C., my friend and philosopher, who instilled confidence in me, especially in the early years of my cultural disjuncture in America, by reminding me that wherever I live, I shall always be a part of the *Mahābhārat*.

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Track 34. Example 3. Color 7
Track 35. Example 3. Color 8

Qōlō: Lōk moriyō qōrōnān
Track 36. Example 4 A. Color 2
Track 37. Example 4 B. Color 6

Qōlō: Ślōmme dābo
Track 46. Example 4 C. Color 2
Track 47. Example 4 D. Color 6

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Abbreviations

Acts	Acts of the Apostles
Ar.	Aramaic
b.	born
c.	century
ca.	*circa*
cfr.	confer
I Cor	the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians
CSB	the Catholic Study Bible
d.	died
Dn	the Book of Daniel
estd.	established
Ez	the Book of Ezra
Jn	Gospel of John
Jon	the Book of Jonah
Ger.	German
Gl	the letter of Paul to the Galatians
Gn	the book of Genesis
Gk.	Greek
Lk	Gospel of Luke
Mal.	Malayalam
Mk	Gospel of Mark
Mt	Gospel of Matthew

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n. a.	not available
n. d.	no date
p.	page
pp.	pages
Rom	the letter of Paul to the Romans
Sk.	Sanskrit
SS.	Saints
Syr.	Syriac
vol.	volume

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Guide to Syriac Transliteration

Vowels

ܲ a = as u in *cup*

ܳ ā = as in *far*

ܶ e = as in *met*

ܵ ē = as a in *mate*

ܴ o = as in *so*,

ō = as in *long*

ܻ u = as in *put*,

ū = as oo in *shoot*

ܺ i = as in *mint*; when preceded by 'a', y as in *yellow*,

ī = as ee in *meet*

Consonants

ܐ ālap = a as in *at* (glottal stop)

ܒ bēṯ = b (hard form) as in *boy*; b̲ (soft form) as w in *way*

ܓ gāmal = g (hard form) as in *gum*; g (soft form), aspirated g

ܕ dālaṯ = d (hard form) as th in *then*; d̲ soft d

ܗ hē = h as in *hey*

ܘ wāw = w as in *way*; when used as vowel, o, u

ܙ zain = z as in *zero*

ܚ hēṯ = h as in *hey*

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 thēṯ = th (aspirated, dental t)

 yōd = y as in *yellow*; when used as vowel, i as in *ink*

 kāp = k (hard form) as in *skip*; k̲ (soft form), aspirated k

 lāmad = l as in *lay*

 mīm = m as in *may*

 nūn = n as in *now*

 semakaṯ = s as in *say*

 ē = e as in *mother* (glottal stop)

 pē = p (hard form) as in *pay*; p̲ (soft from) as w in *way* or as v in *victor*

 sāde = s as in *say*

 qōp = q as in *que*

 rēś = r as in *ray*

 śīn = ś, between s as in *say* and sh in *she*

 tāw = t (hard form) unaspirated, dental t; t̲ (soft form), as s in *say* or as th in *thin*

Note on transliteration. This is a modified version of the system of transliteration of Syriac sounds, suggested by Emmanuel Thelly in his *Introduction to Syriac Studies* (Thelly 2002: 4). Thelly, following his predecessor, Fr. Gabriel of St. Joseph T. O. C. D. (Gabriel [1922] 1961), has adapted the system to represent the sounds of Syriac in India. The finer distinction between the sibilants *semakaṯ* and *sāde* have been lost in India and, therefore, both letters are represented here by s as in *say*. Similarly, *hē* and *hēṯ* often sound the same and, therefore, both are represented here as h in *hey* (see the "Sound of

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Syriac" in Chapter Four). The soft forms of *bēṯ*, *gāmal*, *dālad*, *kāp*, *pē*, and *tāw* are marked by a macron below the letters as in b̲ g̲ d̲ k̲ p̲ ṯ.

The diacritical marks were created with the program TransIndic Transliterator for Windows, by Philip Barton Payne (Linguist's Software, Inc., PO Box 580, Edmonds, WA 98020-0580, USA).

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Guide to Malayalam Transliteration

Vowels

അ a = as u in *cup*

ആ ā = as a in *far*

ഇ i = as i in *ink*

ഈ ī = as ee in *meet*

ഉ u = as u in *put*; ŭ = stopped u at final positions in noun forms

ഊ ū = as oo in *shoot*

ഋ ŕ = similar to r in *rain*

എ e = as e in *met*

ഏ ē = long e

ഐ ai = as y in *dry*

ഒ o = as o in *low*

ഓ ō = as o in *long*

ഔ au = as ou in *loud*

അം aṁ = as um in *gum*

Consonants

ക ka = as k in *kind*

ഖ kha = aspirated ka

ഗ ga = as g in *gum*

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ഘ gha = aspirated ga

ങ ṅa = as ng in *sing*

ച ca = similar to ch in *chin*

ഛ cha = aspirated c

ജ ja = as j in *jump*

ഝ jha = aspirated ja

ഞ ña = as ñ in *mañana* (Spanish)

ട ṭa = retroflex t

ഠ ṭha = aspirated ṭa

ഡ ḍa = retroflex d

ഢ ḍha = aspirated ḍa

ണ ṇa = nasal/retroflex

ത ta = dental t

ഥ tha = aspirated ta

ദ da = as th in *thus*

ധ dha = aspirated da

ന na = as n in *nut* in medial and final positions; dental *na* in initial and final positions.

പ pa = as p in *pulp*

ഫ pha = aspirated pa (not f)

ബ ba = as b in *bucket*

ഭ bha = aspirated ba

മ ma = as m in *mother*

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യ ya = as y in *yellow*

ര ra = alveolar r

ല la = as l in *love*

വ wa = similar to w in *water*

ശ ś = between s in *sum* and sh in *shut*

ഷ sha = as sh in *shut*

സ sa = as s in *sum*

ഹ ha = as h in *hut*

ള ḷa = retroflex l

ഴ zha = retroflex

റ ṟa = similar to r in *rust*

Other characters

ൺ ṇ = similar to n in *done*

ൻ n = as n in *tin*

ൻറ nta = as nt in *enter*

ൟ tta = as tt in *letter*

ൽ l = as l in *until*

ൾ ḷ = similar to l in *role*

ർ ṛ = similar to r in *slur*

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Introduction

The rich and colorful musical mosaic of South India includes the centuries-old Syriac Christian chants that originated in the Middle East. There are about thirty million Christians in India; about seven million of them are known as Syrian Christians or St. Thomas Christians. Kerala, on the south-west coast of India, is home for most of the St. Thomas Christians. They continue to follow the liturgical and musical traditions associated with the Syriac language, which is a form of Aramaic spoken by Jesus and his disciples.

Due to varying ecclesiastical allegiances and divisions starting from the sixteenth century, at present there are eight independent churches among the St. Thomas Christians: the Syro-Malabar Church, the Church of the East, the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, the Malankara Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite) Church, the Syro-Malankara Church, the Mar Thoma Syrian Church, the Independent Church of Thozhiyoor, and the the St. Thomas Evangelical Church of India. The first two churches use the East Syriac (Chaldean) liturgy, and the other churches use the West Syriac (Antiochene) liturgy. Although the Syro-Malabar Church and the Church of the East follow the same liturgical tradition, their melodic repertories are different. Thus, there are two liturgical and three musical traditions among the St. Thomas Christians.

This study focuses on the contemporary practice of the model melodies of the Chaldean rite in the Syro-Malabar Church and the *oktoēchos* ("eight voices") of the

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Chapter One

Syriac Language and Liturgies

The Syriac (Aramaic) Language

Syriac is a form of Aramaic, a northwest Semitic language like Hebrew. Aramaic is the language of Aramaeans who inhabited the region on both sides of the Upper Euphrates, now comprising eastern Syria and northern Iraq. In biblical times this region was called *Ārām* or *Ārām Naharaim*, meaning "Aram of the Rivers" (the Greeks later called it Mesopotamia, meaning "between rivers"). According to biblical tradition, the name of the region as well as that of the people came from the name of Noah's grandson, *Ārām*, who was considered the progenitor of Aramaeans (Gn 10:22-23). By about the tenth century B. C., the Aramaeans extended their territories to southern Babylonia. The Chaldeans, the people of Chaldea, the region bordering the head of the Persian Gulf between the Arabian desert and the Euphrates delta, are the descendants of the Aramaean settlers in that region (Fitzmyer 2003: 623-625). Because of the intermingling of races and cultures in the region in the subsequent centuries, "Aramaean," "Babylonian," and "Chaldean" became synonymous terms.

The history of the Aramaic language is part of the history of the Assyrian, the Babylonian, and the Persian empires. The Assyrians conquered Aram in the eighth century B. C., and Aramaic became the second language of the Assyrian Empire. During the Babylonian empire in the seventh and the sixth centuries B. C., Aramaic was the common language of Western Asia. Aramaic gained trans-regional importance during the

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Chapter Two

St. Thomas Christians and Syriac Churches

The St. Thomas Christians in India take their name from the Apostle Thomas who, they believe, arrived in Kerala in *ca.* AD 52, preached the faith in the surrounding regions, and died a martyr at Chennai (Madras), in Tamil Nadu, in AD 72.[1] They celebrate that belief in their liturgies and performing arts, one of which is a group dance called *mārggam kaḷi* (*mārggam* = "way," *kaḷi* = "play," "play of the way"). It is traditionally performed by men who sing and dance simultaneously. The song text contains more than four hundred lines in fourteen cantos. The text decribes the missionary endeavors of St. Thomas in South India and his martyrdom at Chennai.[2]

More than the song text, the title of the dance bears greater significance in the discussion of early Christian history in India. The Hindus in southern India who converted to Christianity borrowed a Sanskrit term, *mārg*, to designate the new faith that came to their land. The act of conversion from Hinduism or other religious faiths to Christianity was called *mārggam kūṭal* ("joining the way"). The term *mārg* had already received special significance by the sixth century B. C., in the context of Buddhism. The

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[1] For scholarly studies of the St. Thomas tradition, see Mundadan ([1984] 2001), Neill (1984), and Tisserant (1957). The feast of St. Thomas the Apostle is observed every year on the third of July; the feast is referred to in Kerala as *dukrāna* (Syr., "remembrance").

[2] See the text with a brief commentary in Velliyan and Vempeni (1995: 87-125); for more information on *mārggam kaḷi* and photos of performances, see Groesbeck and Palackal (2000: 945-46); Palackal (1995: 41-43; 1999:11; and 2001: 234).

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Figure 1. The "Persian cross," also known as "St. Thomas cross," at St. Thomas Cathedral, near Myalpore, in Chennai, Tamil Nadu.

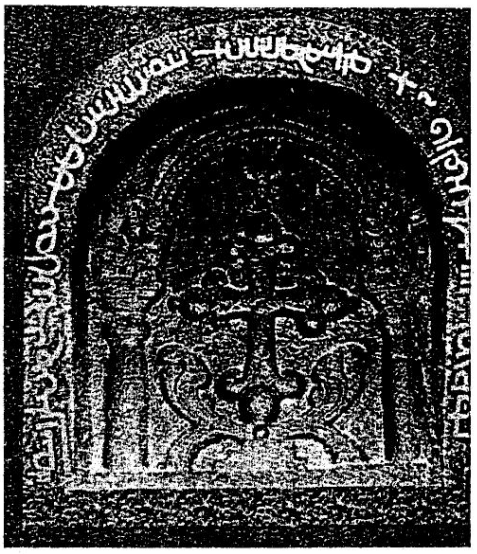


Figure 2. The Persian cross at Valiyapally, at Kottayam, Kerala.



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Chapter Three

The East Syriac and West Syriac Liturgies in India

The East Syriac and West Syriac liturgies, discussed in Chapter One, have their own histories in India. Accordingly, this chapter is divided into two sections, on the history of East Syriac liturgy and on that of West Syriac liturgy. As is shown in Table 1, among the eight Syriac churches of the St. Thomas Christians, the Syro-Malabar Church and the Church of the East follow the East Syriac liturgy, and the other churches follow the West Syriac liturgy

Table 1. Syriac churches and their respective liturgies.

Liturgy in East Syriac	Liturgy in West Syriac
Syro-Malabar Church	**Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church**
Church of the East	**Malankara Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite) Church**
	Syro-Malankara Church
	Mar Thoma Syrian Church
	Independent Church of Thozhiyoor
	St. Thomas Evangelical Church of India

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Chapter Five

The Role of Music in the Struggle for Religious Identity

The story of the survival of the Syriac chant traditions in South India is part of the larger history of the struggle for maintaining the religious identity of the St. Thomas Christians over the centuries. What was a single church until the middle of the seventeenth century became eight Syriac churches by the end of the twentieth century. The divisions happened, in most cases, as a reaction to the hegemonic influences from churches outside India: the Roman Catholic Church, represented by the Portuguese, in the sixteenth century; the Jacobite Church of Antioch in the seventeenth century; the Church of England in the first half of the nineteenth century, the Chaldean Catholic Church in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the Assyrian Church of the East in early twentieth century.

Liturgy and music were significant areas of contention in the conflict between the St. Thomas Christians and the Portuguese missionaries, who tended to identify the one and only true Church of Christ with the Roman Catholic Church with the Pope as its supreme head. The missionaries had little respect for the Syriac liturgy and music. Most probably, they encountered Syriac liturgical music for the first time in Kerala, and it must have sounded weird and even heretical to their ears. Conformity to the Latin way of life would require the local Christians to change their age-old practices. What the missionaries failed to understand was the emotional attachment of the St. Thomas Christians to Syriac language, liturgy, and music. For the St. Thomas Christians, these

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Chapter Six

Model Melodies of the Syro-Malabar Church

The musical repertory of the Syro-Malabar Church consists of a plethora of styles, ranging from the local to the regional and pan-regional, not to mention the ubiquitous film style of music. This chapter focuses on one part of the repertory: the model melodies used in the liturgy.

Rēś Qālā (model melody)

One of the significant features of the East Syriac (Chaldean) liturgy is the use of what is known as *rēś qālā*, which literally means "head melody" or "head song" (from two Syriac words, *rēś*, meaning "head" and *qālā*, meaning "song," "melody," "tune," etc.). The term connotes both a particular chant text written in a specific meter as well as the melody associated with that chant. The word *rēś* might have been used to mean the first strophe of a chant, because the chants that belong to this category are strophic, and all stanzas are sung to the melody of the "head" strophe. A *rēś qālā* is a compositional design that serves as a metric and melodic model for creating new chant texts to an existing melody. Therefore, I have translated the term as "model melody." A model melody may be defined as a complete and fixed tune, which is associated with a text that is composed in a specific poetic meter. Thus, there can be several chants composed in the same poetic meter for different occasions in liturgy that are sung to a single model melody.

The concept of *rēś 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 example, the text and melody of the chant *qambel māran* is sung

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