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THE SYRIAC CHANT TRADITIONS IN SOUTH INDIA

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The Syriac (Aramaic) liturgy and liturgical chants that originated in the Middle East found their way into South India through immigrant Christians sometime before the fifth century. Continuous contact between the "Syrian Christians" (descendants of Hindu converts and immigrant Christians)¹ in India and the Persian Church kept the chant tradition rejuvenated in the subsequent centuries. Due to divisions and varying ecclesiastical allegiances starting from the sixteenth century, there are now two liturgical and three chant traditions among the Syrian Christians. The Syro-Malabar Church (in union with Rome) and the Church of the East (Diophysite, also known as Nestorian) continue the Chaldean liturgy, which was originally in East Syriac, while the Syrian Orthodox Church (Monophysite, also known as Jacobite) adopted the Antiochene liturgy, which was originally in West Syriac. Although the first two Churches follow the same liturgical tradition with minor variations, their musical repertoires as they exist today are different from each other. As a means of preserving their individual identity, all three Churches retained most of the original Syriac melodies in the process of vernacularizing the liturgies to Malayalam since the 1960s. Thus, the melodies that were once associated with Syriac

¹ The Syrian Christians are also known as "St. Thomas Christians." Tradition has it that St. Thomas the Apostle preached Christianity in South India.

texts of celebrated poets such as St. Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373), Narsai (d.c. 503), and Jacob of Serugh (d. 521) assumed yet another life in a completely different cultural milieu of South India. It is a matter of historical and ethnomusicological interest that the melodies of these chants have not only survived over such a long period of time, but also have retained their unique identity amidst vibrant musical traditions of the Hindus, Muslims, and Jews in South India. Yet, neither the history nor the music of the chants has received adequate attention from musicologists. My purpose is to identify and address the problems and issues in the study of these chant traditions from historical and analytical perspectives.

On a personal note, I was born and raised in Kerala, South India, where I grew up listening to and singing the Syriac chants of the Syro-Malabar Church. Later, I familiarized myself with the chant traditions of the other Syrian Churches. While doing fieldwork in Kerala for my master's thesis², I noticed how singers of *Puthen Pāna*, a Christian musical genre, adapted melodic phrases and stylistic aspects of Syriac chants such as the ornamentation of the ultimate or the penultimate syllable of a word. The discussion of the melodies of *Puthen Pāna* in my thesis includes analysis of a few melodies of the Syriac chants. Thus, my personal experience and knowledge of the Syriac chant traditions give me a vantage point from which to look at the repertoires as a researcher.

I shall divide the dissertation in two parts: part I will contain discussions of historical issues and part II, analytical issues.

² Puthen Pāna : A Musical Study (Hunter College of the City University of New York, 1995).

Part I : Historical issues

In chapter 1, I shall examine the historical processes involved in the introduction of different liturgical and musical traditions at various stages in the history of the Syrian Christians. For this chapter, I shall rely heavily on the published histories of Christianity in India mentioned in the bibliography. I have spent several years studying the history of Christianity and Christian music in India. The first two chapters of my master's thesis contain short surveys of those histories. The knowledge and experience I gained in the process will help me toward a historical overview of the Syriac liturgies and music in South India.

When it comes to the study of the history of chants themselves, one encounters the problem of the dearth of musical documentation in the past. Therefore, the musical history of the chants has to be constructed primarily from contemporary practice by employing both synchronic and diachronic methods. Through interviews with older informants, and reviewing the available published sources such as Saldanha (1937) and Vadakel (1954), I intend to gather information on the state of music before vernacularization of the liturgies (i.e., before the 1960s). My primary concern, however, is to assess the current practice, including individual and regional variations in the singing of the melodies that exist primarily in oral transmission, the singers' perception of and judgment on such variations, and the factors behind the survival of certain melodies and gradual disappearance of certain others.

In chapter 2, I shall explore the survival strategies of the Syrian Christians that helped the preservation of the Syriac chant traditions. One of the reasons for the survival of Syriac chants in South India is the distinction the Christians made between their social identity and their musical identity. Early sixteenth-century accounts of the Portuguese missionaries testify that the Christianity they encountered in South India was a highly indigenized one. The Christians shared

with their Hindu neighbors many social customs and practices. However, in matters related to liturgical celebrations, they adhered strictly to Syriac language and music. When the Portuguese missionaries attempted to enforce Latin liturgy and chant, the Syrian Christians went so far as to stage a revolt against the Portuguese. The current debate on the reform of the Chaldean liturgy (in Malayalam) in the Syro-Malabar Church once again brings the issue of musical identity to the foreground.

In chapter 3, I shall discuss the impact of Western (Latin) Christian hegemony of the Portuguese missionaries on the Syriac chant traditions. The Portuguese missionaries failed to replace Syriac liturgy with Latin liturgy and chant. However, they succeeded in introducing the Holy Week and paraliturgical services such as Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, Novena to saints and solemn Vespers in Syriac translations. This gave rise to a new set of Syriac chants that are characterized by a higher melodic range and greater rhythmic regularity in comparison with the chants of the Mass and the Office. A relatively small proportion of these chants was retained in the process of vernacularizing the liturgies. The missionaries also introduced Western musical instruments such as pedal organ, violin, and bass drum. The impact of these and similar innovations is visible even today in the liturgical celebrations, especially in the Syro-Malabar Church.

Exploration of the historical issues mentioned above shall serve as a background for studying the analytical issues in part II.

Part II: Analytical issues

Chapter 4 will be devoted to the discussion of a significant feature of the Syriac music repertory in South India, viz., the preservation of the Oktoechos system in the Syrian Orthodox Church.

The *echoi* are referred to in Malayalam, since at least the eighteenth century, as *ettu niram* (eight colors) or *ettu rāgam*. They are numbered serially from 1 to 8, e.g., *onnām niram* (first color), *randām niram* (second color), etc. Melodies of the Oktoechoi of the Syrian Churches outside India have received scholarly attention in the past (Jeannin 1925-28, Husmann 1969, 1971, and Kuckertz 1969). I intend to illustrate the distinctive characteristics of the *ettu niram* by analyzing five representative chants in each *niram*. My inquiry will also include the aesthetic and ethical aspects of *niram* as understood by its practitioners. Findings of this study will be useful for cross-cultural comparisons.

In chapter 5, I shall make a comparative study of the model melodies used as a compositional device in the Syro-Malabar Church and the Church of the East. A model melody is a complete, fixed tune for creating new hymns by writing verses that will fit the melody. Although, in principle, model melodies are fixed tunes, individual differences do occur in actual performance. I shall attempt to study the range of variations in seventeen model melodies that are currently in vogue in the Syro-Malabar liturgy by analysing performances by different individuals from different dioceses. The Syro-Malabar Church and the Church of the East follow the same Chaldean liturgy. However, the melodic and rhythmic features of model melodies used in both liturgies are quite different. I intend to compare the characteristics of the model melodies of both Churches by analyzing sample melodies from the respective repertoires.

Finally, chapter 6 will consist of a discussion of the influence of language in melodic transformation. Translation of Syriac liturgies to the vernacular presents new issues related to language and music. A preliminary analysis of contemporary chants in comparison with their older versions shows changes, especially in the rhythmic aspects of the melodies. There appears to be a tendency, at least in some cases, to adjust the melody to indigenous metric structures. The

semantic and syntactic structures of Malayalam seem to influence the choice of ornamentation of the ultimate or the penultimate syllable of a word. I shall pursue these and other similar issues by a comparative study of the Syriac and Malayalam versions of a selected number of model melodies. Heinrich Husmann's transcription of the Syriac chants of the Chaldean Office for Sundays and ordinary days recorded in Kerala in the early 1960s will be useful in this study.³

Relevance

The richness and the diversity in the Syriac chant traditions in South India demand more scholarly attention than what they received in the past. A history of India's music may be incomplete without the history of Indian Christian music. A study of the historical processes involved in the retention of a musical tradition outside its original geographical and cultural domain will be valuable to the understanding of the interaction between music and history. The timeliness of this project, too, adds to its relevance. There are people still alive who can sing the older version of the melodies with the original Syriac texts. Those informants are crucial witnesses to a musical tradition that is undergoing rapid transformation.

Research Plan and Methodology

My immediate plan is to acquire a reading knowledge of Syriac language so that I can consult the Syriac sources of chants and liturgical texts available in India. Fr. Eleazer Vadakkumchery has agreed to teach me the language in this summer during my stay in Kerala. My next priority is to study the structure of the Antiochene liturgy of the Syrian Orthodox Church and to record at

³ Heinrich Husmann. Die Melodien des Chaldäischen Breviers Commune nach den Traditionen Vorderasiens und der Malabarküste (1967: 108-176).

least five chants in each of the *ettu niram*, in both Syriac and Malayalam, for an analytical study. Dr. M.P. George, who is currently teaching at the Theological Seminary of the Syrian Orthodox Church at Kottayam, Kerala, has given his consent to help me in this matter.

In the past few years I have interviewed several resource persons from the Syro-Malabar Church and the Church of the East. Audio recordings of these interviews include renditions of chants by the informants. Fr. Abel Periyappuram (b. 1920) is the most important resource person for the liturgical music of the Syro-Malabar Church. It was Fr. Abel who translated the Syriac texts of the chants for Mass, Office, and funeral services of the Chaldean liturgy to the vernacular in the 1960s. He was kind enough to sing for me seventeen model melodies, both in Syriac and Malayalam. In addition to this, I intend to interview sixteen informants, eight men and eight women, between the age of 25 and 40, from a cross-section of the population of the Syro-Malabar Church. Two men and two women each will be chosen from the dioceses of Palai, Kottayam, Ernakulam, and Thrissur. I shall record their versions of the model melodies for transcription and analysis to assess the range of variations within each model melody.

I made an audio recording of the Syriac version of the model melodies, some of which are not currently in use, sung by Fr. Alexander Kattakkayam (b. 1912), a former teacher of Syriac language and an accomplished singer of Syriac chants. I shall further record the Syriac version of the model melodies sung by ten more informants (mostly priests) from the older generation, to assess the differences between the Syriac and Malayalam versions of the melodies.

I interviewed Most Rev. Dr. Mar Aprem, the Metropolitan and the head of the Church of the East (Nestorian) at Thrissur, Kerala. During the recorded interview Mar Aprem, along with Deacon Varghese and Deacon C.D. Pully, sang the melodies of Mass, Office, and funeral services. Additionally, I plan to interview five informants and record their versions of melodies for a

comparative study of the model melodies of the Church of the East and the Syro-Malabar Church.

I shall conduct the field work in two stages. I shall spend three months in this summer in Kerala. During this period, I shall locate informants and conduct a few interviews, especially with the older informants. My focus will be on the chant tradition of the Syrian Orthodox Church. After returning to New York, I shall transcribe the melodies and conduct a preliminary analysis. I shall go to Kerala again for six months in March 2000, to do the rest of the fieldwork.

Tentative Outline

Introduction

Part I: Music and History

Chapter 1. Syriac Liturgies and Chant Traditions in South India: A Historical Overview

Chapter 2. Survival Strategies of the Syrian Christians: Social Identity vs. Musical Identity

Chapter 3. Western Christian Hegemony and the Syriac Chants of the Syro-Malabar Church

Part II: Scales, *Niram*, and Model Melodies

Chapter 4. *Ettu niram* of the Syrian Orthodox Church

Chapter 5. Model Melodies of the Chaldean Liturgy in the Syro-Malabar Church and the Church of the East: A comparative Study

Chapter 6. From Syriac to Malayalam: Language and Musical Transformation

Conclusion

State of Research

A renewal of interest in the Western Latin Christian chant toward the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century led music scholars to search for the original or older versions of the melodies in the chants of the Eastern Churches. Dom Jean Parisot (1861-1923) was sent on an official "scientific mission" by the French Government in 1896 to study Syriac language and music of the Maronite, Syrian, and Chaldean rites in Turkey and Syria. His reports published in Rapport sur une mission scientifique en Turquie d'Asie (Paris, 1899) and Rapport sur une mission scientifique en Turquie et Syrie (Paris, 1903) include transcriptions of chants from these rites. At about the same time, three French priests --Dom Jules Jeannin, Dom Julien Puyade, and Dom Anselme Chibas-Lassalle-- engaged in the study of Syriac liturgical music. They published Mémoires liturgiques syriennes et chaldéennes (Paris, 1925-1928), an extensive collection of Syriac chants sung at the monastery at Charfu in Lebanon along with a discussion on the melodies and their classification according to the system of the Syrian Octoechos. Josef Kuckertz, in "Die Melodietypen der westsyrischen liturgischen Gesänge." Kirchenmusikaliches Jahrbuch, vol. 53, 1969), analysed the melody types of the West Syrian liturgical hymns to explain the principles of classification of melodies according to the eight "Tones" of the Syrian Oktoechos.

Heinrich Husmann has made valuable contributions to Syriac music scholarship through his transcriptions of a large number of melodies from the repertoires of the Jacobite and Chaldean Churches. The work he edited, Die Melodien der jacobitischen Kirche, i: Die Melodien des Wochenbreviers (shīmtā) gesungen von Qurillāos Jaqub Kas Görgös, Metropolit von Damaskus (Vienna, 1969), contains transcriptions of the melodies of the Office of the Jacobite Church. His

transcriptions of the melodies of a particular genre, known as *qāle* ("melodies," sing. *qālā*), are published in Die Melodien der jacobitischen Kirche, ii: Die Qāle gaoānāie des Beit gazā (Vienna, 1971). Both these publications are helpful to understand the system of the Syrian Oktoechos. Husmann's transcriptions of the melodies of the Chaldean Breviary, as sung in the Near East and in Kerala, are published in Die Melodien des Chaldäischen Breviers Commune nach den Traditionen Vorderasiens und der Malabarküste (Rome, 1967).

A. Saldanha, a Jesuit priest, made the first attempt in India to transcribe the melodies of the solemn sung mass of the Syro-Malabar rite in Western staff notation. His transcriptions appear in the first part of The Syriac-Malayalam Hymnal (Calicut, 1937). Seventeen years later, Fr. Mathew Vadakel edited Kerala kaldāya suriyāni reethile thirukkarmma geethangal (liturgical hymns of the Chaldeo-Syrian rite of Kerala; Alwaye, 1954) which contains an extensive collection of chants (in Western staff notation) for the solemn celebration of the mass and other liturgical and paraliturgical occasions such as the solemn Vespers, Novena to saints, and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. As in the previous book, the Syriac texts appear in Malayalam transliteration. In "Ritual and Music in South India: Syrian Christian Liturgical Music in Kerala" (Asian Music, vol. 11, 1979), Israel Ross made an analytical study of a few Syrian Christian chants (it is not clear from which of the three traditions) and found resemblance between Syriac chants and Hebrew cantillation. According to Ross, "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*)." (This seems to me to be an overgeneralization).

Husmann's article, "Syriac Church Music," in The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians (vol. 18, London, 1980), and Ulrike Nieten's article, "Syrische Kirchenmusik," in Die

Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart (vol. 9, Kassel, 1998) provide short historical backgrounds of the various Syrian Churches and their respective liturgies. Both authors discuss the musical forms and styles of these liturgies with special emphasis on the modal system, analogous to the Byzantine Oktoechos, that is in use in the Syrian Orthodox Church.

Advice and Consultations

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