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Address:

ARAM Society for Syro-Mesopotamian Studies The Oriental Institute The University of Oxford Pusey Lane Oxford OX1 2LE – UK Tel: +44 (0)1865 514041 Email: aram@orinst.ox.ac.uk

www.aramsociety.org

Editor:

Dr. Shafiq Abouzayd
The Oriental Institute
The University of Oxford
Pusey Lane
Oxford OX1 2LE – UK
Mobile: +44 (0)7977 495150
shafiq.abouzayd@orinst.ox.ac.uk

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THE SURVIVAL STORY OF THE SOUND, SENTIMENTS, AND MELODIES OF THE ARAMAIC CHANTS IN INDIA

JOSEPH J. PALACKAL (Christian Musicological Society of India)

Abstract

The generation that lived through the transition of liturgy from Syriac (Aramaic) to the vernacular in the 1960s in the Syro Malabar Church in Kerala, India, continues to own an extensive memory base of sounds, melodies, and meanings of the Syriac chants. These chants were once significant markers of the identity of the St. Thomas Christians, also known as Nazranis or Syrian (Syriac) Christians. While many of the chant texts are available in books and manuscripts, the melodies and their specific sonorities, which were mostly transmitted orally, are gradually fading from the memories of the transitional generation. This generation is the last link to the legacy of a centuries-old tradition. The Aramaic Project, launched by the Christian Musicological Society of India in 2012, is a belated and time-sensitive attempt to document the melodies and memories and pass them on to the younger generation. Although the youngsters seem to be enthusiastic, it is unclear at this point if they will own these experiences and pass them on to the next generation. Even if it is only partially successful, the Project may lead to the preservation of at least some aspects of this endangered world heritage. The current political upheavals in the Middle East, which is the primary religious and cultural source of the Syriac heritage, are adversely affecting the survival of these linguistic and musical treasures of humanity. Hence the urgency of the Aramaic Project in India.

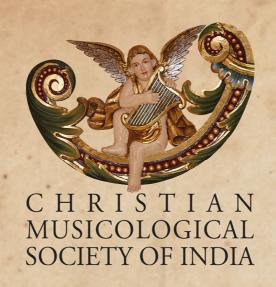
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this paper to the Saintly Palackal Thoma Malpan (1780-1841), my collateral ancestor. He was a great teacher of the Aramaic Language, founder of the first seminary of the St. Thomas Christians, and co-founder of the first religious congregation for men in India, to which I belong, the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate. It is a great honor to write about the language that Thoma Malpan cherished dearly.

ARAMAIC CHRISTIANITY IN SOUTH INDIA

For almost one thousand years, the biggest export item from India was religion. That religion was not Hinduism; it was Buddhism (Sen, 2005: xii). Soon after Emperor Ashoka (d. 232 BCE) embraced Buddhism, he became its most prominent promoter, sending missionaries to many different parts of the world. More importantly, Emperor Asoka laid down rules for respectful dialogue among the followers of different religious traditions. So, by the time Christianity came on the scene, India had already prepared a mindset that could welcome diverse ideas and philosophies. It is in this context that we talk about the movement of Christianity from West Asia to South India.

Christianity probably came to South India before the preaching of Jesus became a religion. The St. Thomas Christians in India believe that Christian faith came to Kerala, on the southwest coast of India, through St. Thomas, the apostle. The region was known to West Asia through the spice trade; it is possible that the Apostle joined one of the trade ships. In any case, the St. Thomas Christians received the gospel message from the Apostle, who made the most robust profession



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