

# ARAM

PERIODICAL

SYRIAC CHRISTIANITY

AFTERLIFE IN THE  
ANCIENT NEAR EAST



VOLUME 32

2020

ARAM is a peer-reviewed periodical published by the ARAM Society for Syro-Mesopotamian Studies

**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](mailto:aram@orinst.ox.ac.uk)  
[www.aramsociety.org](http://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](mailto:shafiq.abouzayd@orinst.ox.ac.uk)

**Articles:**

Articles for publication to be sent to ARAM at the above address.

**Subscription:**

New subscriptions to be sent to ARAM at the above address.

**Book Orders:**

Order from the link: [www.aramsociety.org](http://www.aramsociety.org)  
or directly from the publisher: <https://www.lulu.com/spotlight/ARAM120>

ISSN: 0959-4213

© 2020 ARAM SOCIETY FOR SYRO-MESOPOTAMIAN STUDIES

All rights reserved. No parts of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, without prior permission of the publisher.

## 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





C H R I S T I A N  
MUSICOLOGICAL  
SOCIETY OF INDIA

For further information  
regarding this text

Please contact

*library@thecmsindia.org*

---

Please join the  
'CMSI Benefactors Club'  
and support the ongoing projects of  
Christian Musicological Society Of India

---

- DIGITAL LIBRARY • ARAMAIC PROJECT
- ENCYCLOPEDIA OF SYRIAC CHANTS
- MUSIC ICONOGRAPHY • CHRISTIAN ART
- RESOURCE FOR RESEARCHERS