

# **CHRISTIANITY AND NATIVE CULTURES**

**Perspectives from Different Regions of the World**

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## INTERFACE BETWEEN HISTORY AND MUSIC IN THE CHRISTIAN CONTEXT OF SOUTH INDIA

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Christianity in South India is a complex socio-religious phenomenon encompassing an array of sects and practices. The diversity of the Christian experience in this geographical area that consists of five states (Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Goa) is the result of multiple missionary enterprises, dating probably as far back as the middle of the first century. According to the information available in the *Indian Christian Directory*, published by Rashtra Deepika in 2000, there are more than thirty-three Churches active in South India. These Churches may be divided into seven broad categories: the Syrian Church, whose members are also known as St. Thomas Christians; the Latin (Roman) rite Church; the Lutheran Church; the Anglican Church; the Methodist Church; the Baptist Church; and the Pentecostal Church. The membership varies from a few thousand up to several million. In the absence of exact statistical data, we may estimate that out of the thirty million Christians in India, about twenty million live in the South. They constitute a diverse set of communities shaped by language, culture, and even caste.

Although the early history of these churches is inevitably linked to the history of individuals and their places of origin (the Middle East, Europe, and America), each Church has developed its own character in India over the centuries.<sup>1</sup> The interaction between divergent religious and theological perspectives, proselytization policies, and attitudes toward indigenous and foreign cultures are among the many factors that contributed to the formation of their particular histories which, in turn,

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<sup>1</sup> M. Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India, Vol. I, From the Beginning up to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century (Up to 1542)*, (Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 1989; First published in 1984).

are embedded in the larger history of South India.

Music has been an integral part of the Christian experience, and musicological discourse can be an effective tool in historiography. The music history of these churches can enhance our understanding of their general history and vice versa. The formation and transformation of musical styles in any given culture are often closely associated with events of historical significance mediated by individuals and communities. A community's awareness of its mission and identity can affect its musical choices regarding what is retained by one generation and what is transmitted to the next. Musical memories preserved and transmitted from generation to generation through oral tradition can be a valuable source of information, especially when there is a dearth of written documents.

My focus here is the musical history of the Syro-Malabar Church in Kerala to show how musical and historical inquiries can be interdependent. As we shall see later, sometimes a single chant can tell us the story of interactions at multiple levels between distant regions and diverse peoples within a span of several centuries.

The vast musical repertory of the Syro-Malabar Church consists of a wide variety of genres ranging from the ancient Syriac chants of St. Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373) to the most modern compositions intended for multimedia consumption. For practical purposes, I shall limit my inquiry to the liturgical music genre, and within the liturgical music genre to the history of the Syriac chant tradition from what may be called the Portuguese period, dating from the early sixteenth century.

The Syro-Malabar Church is one of the seven Syrian Churches, or more appropriately, 'Syriac Churches' of South India that use Syriac language and music in their liturgy. Syriac is a form of Aramaic, which developed as an independent dialect in the first century AD, and became the literary language of the Aramaic-speaking Christians. By the fifth century, Syriac differentiated itself into East Syriac and West Syriac on the basis of the method of writing and the manner of pronunciation. Edessa, which was outside the boundary of the Roman Empire, became the center for the East Syriac (also known as Chaldean) liturgical tradition, and Antioch, which was within the boundary of the Roman Empire, became the center for the West Syriac (also known as Antiochean) tradition. The Syro-Malabar Church follows the Chaldean liturgical tradition with a few elements adopted from the Latin liturgy. The name 'Syro-Malabar Church' is the official designation given by Rome in 1896 to the section of the St. Thomas Christians which is in communion with the

Roman Church. The term 'Syro-Malabar' denotes the use of Syriac language in what was known in the West as the Malabar region. Malabar is one of the old names for the region currently known as Kerala; the name, probably coined by early Arab traders, seems to be a combination of the Malayalam word, *mala* ('mountain') and the Persian, *bar* ('place').

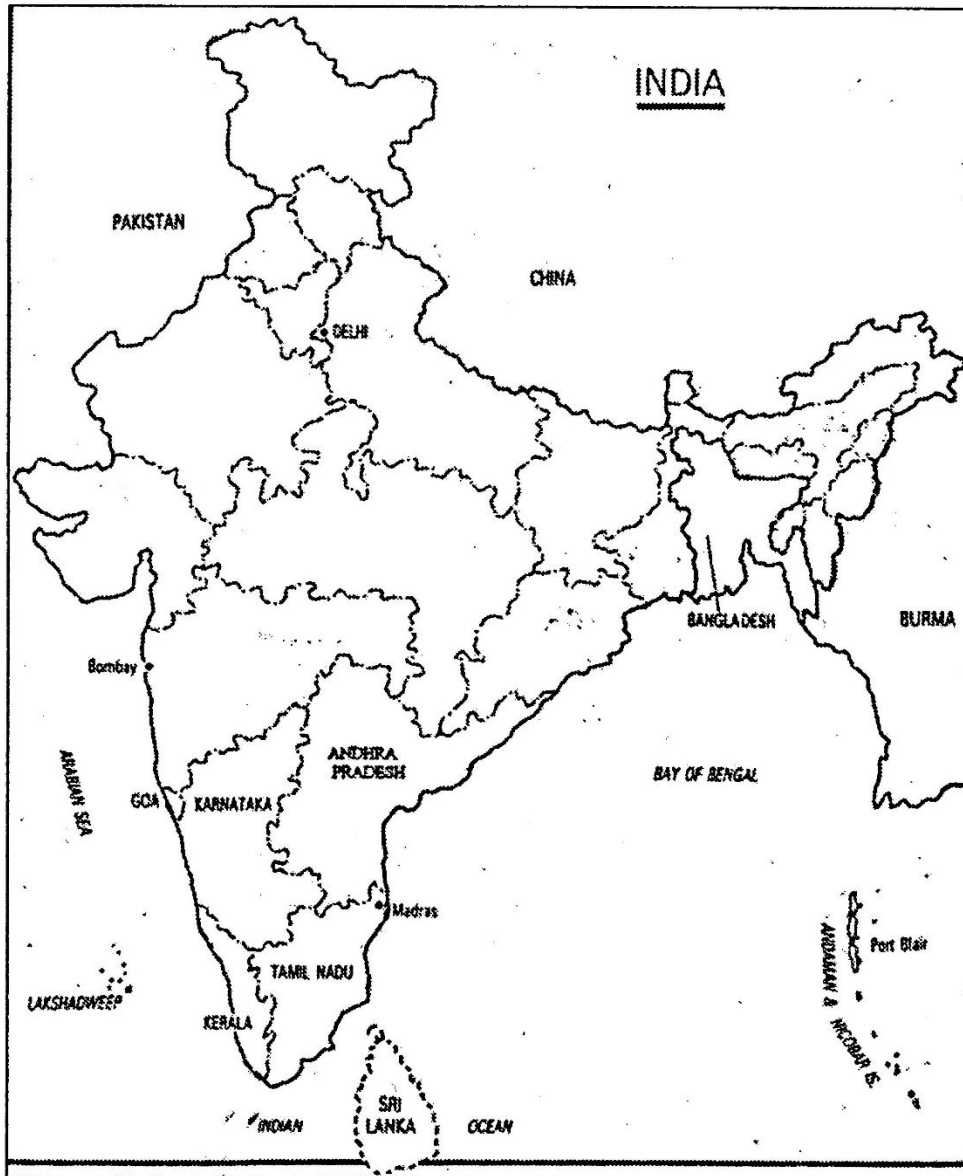


Figure 1 Map of India showing the southern states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Goa.

When the Portuguese missionaries arrived in Kerala at the dawn of the sixteenth century, they were pleasantly surprised to find a prosperous community of Christians, who traced the origin of their faith to the



preaching of St. Thomas the Apostle (hence the name, 'St. Thomas Christians'). This community handed over from generation to generation their belief that the Apostle Thomas arrived in Kerala in 52 AD, preached the new faith (*mārggam*) and established seven 'churches' (*palli*).<sup>2</sup> However, disappointment set in when the missionaries found that the native Christians followed another liturgy in a language different from Latin, professed allegiance to the Chaldean Patriarch, and shared many customs and practices of their Hindu neighbors, including the caste system. The rift widened as the Portuguese gained military, mercantile, and missionary power in Kerala, and political power in Goa, on the western coast. The Portuguese missionaries failed, in the words of Stephen Neill, "to understand...the intensity of the attachment of the Thomas Christians to the ancient ways and in particular to Syriac their liturgical language."<sup>3</sup> To the St. Thomas Christians, the Syriac language, the liturgy, and other social and religious traditions were markers of their unique identity for which they even coined a term, *mārthommāyute mārggawum wazhipātum* (approximately, 'the way and lineage of St. Thomas').<sup>4</sup> The missionaries, on the other hand, wanted the local Christians to wean themselves from their dependence on the Chaldean Church and to adopt the Western form of Catholic religion, which they believed was the authentic form. The conflict of ideologies and allegiances finally led to what is known as the Synod of Diamper, a watershed moment in the history of Christianity in India. The Synod was called by Alexis De Menezes, the Archbishop of Goa, and was held at Udayamperoor, in Kerala, in June 1599. Archbishop Menezes persuaded the St. Thomas Christians to denounce the patriarch of the Chaldean Church and profess their allegiance to the pope. The Archbishop also asked the St. Thomas Christians to discard many indigenous social customs and rituals. The result was a gradual process of Latinisation of the St. Thomas Christians that succeeded to some extent.

One of the decrees of the Synod provides interesting information on the role of music in the celebration of the Syriac liturgy. In decree XIV of Session V, the Synod decried the local custom of inviting Hindu

<sup>2</sup> Both terms, *palli* and *mārggam*, belong to the Buddhist tradition. Buddhism was present in South India in the early Christian era.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Neill, *A History of Christianity in India: the Beginnings to A.D. 1707* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 195.

<sup>4</sup> The scholars of Indian Christianity and specialists on Indian languages are yet to arrive at a full explanation of the term. The translation found in English writings, 'Law of Thomas,' does not do justice to the original concept.

musicians to perform inside the church during the celebration of mass on festive occasions in the following words:

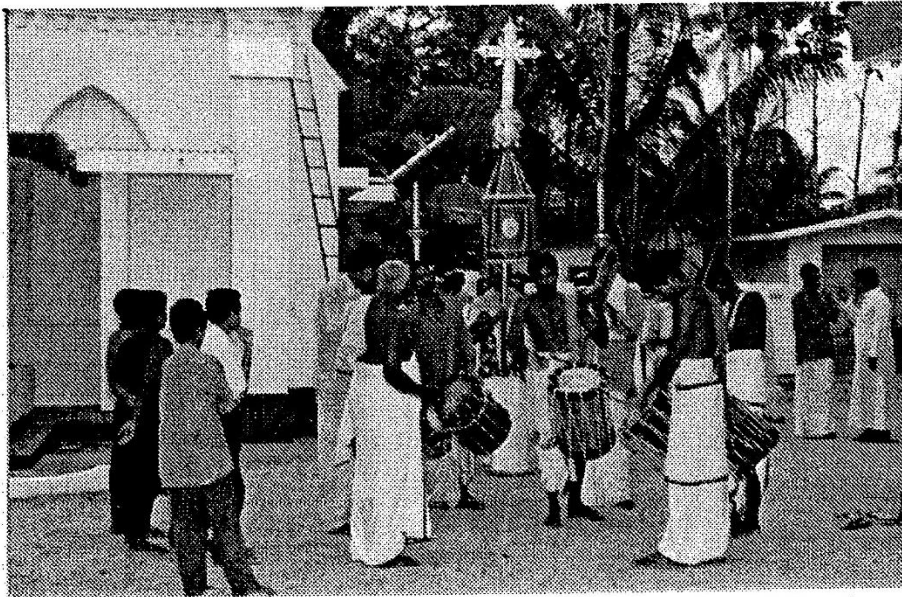
Whereas up on several festivals of the church there are musicians called to the celebration thereof, according to the custom of the country, who are all heathens, small care being taken in what part of the church they are placed, or to hinder them from playing during the time of the holy sacrifice, at which no excommunicate person or infidel ought to be present, therefore the Synod doth command, that great care be taken not to suffer them to remain in the church after the creed is said, or the sermon, if there be one, is ended, that so they may not behold the holy sacrament; the vicar shall also be careful to drive all heathens who may come upon such occasion, from the doors and windows of the church.<sup>5</sup>

The decree poses several points for discussion, some of which require further research. For example, it is not clear what were the 'several festivals' for which Hindu musicians were invited to perform. The nature of the musical instruments that the 'heathens' played in the church is not clear either. Probably, they were playing instrumental ensembles such as *panchawādyam* or *chentamēlam* (see Figures 2 & 3) that are considered auspicious in India. *Panchawādyam* is a drumming ensemble consisting of five kinds of instruments, *timila*, *maddalam*, *itaykka*, *ilattālam*, and *kompu*. *Chentamēlam* is an ensemble of three or four *chenta* (a two-headed cylindrical stick drum) and an *ilattālam* (a pair of hand cymbals). These mostly percussive instrument ensembles were, and are still, the most popular in the region, and are essential to temple festivals and religious performing arts of the Hindus. The performers belong to a particular Hindu caste, called *mārār*. It is difficult to determine whether the musicians provided instrumental accompaniment to the Syriac chants or whether they played their own music at certain points in the celebration of the mass. Probably, they played before the beginning of the mass, following the indigenous practice of *kēlikottu* (literally, 'striking to hear') to announce the commencement of a solemn and auspicious event. It is also possible that they played an instrumental prelude or a coda to *trisagion*

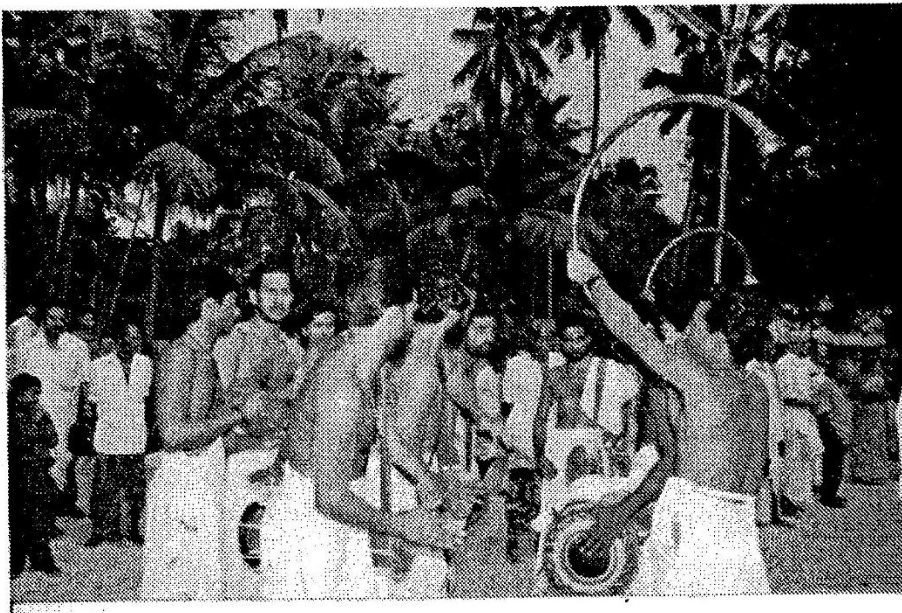
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<sup>5</sup> *The Acts and Decrees of the Synod of Diamper, A.D. 1599*, S. Zacharia, edit. (Kottayam, Kerala, India: Indian Institute of Christian Studies, 1994), 142.

and *lākumāra*, two hymns that used to be sung three times consecutively with great solemnity.



*Figure 2 Chenta players leading the procession during the celebration of the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary at St. Mary's Forane Church, Pallippuram, Kerala. August 15, 2000.*



*Figure 3 Panchawādyam ensemble performing in the middle of the procession.*

The decree alludes to the presence of the musicians inside the church during the Anaphora (Eucharistic prayer), the central part of the mass. In those days, after the mass of the catechumens, the deacon asked

all those who had not received baptism and those who were not prepared to receive the holy communion to leave the church, and the acolytes closed the main doors of the church for the rest of the mass.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, there must have been a significant reason for the community to allow the presence of Hindu musicians inside the church during such solemn parts of the liturgy. It may be presumed that the musicians were asked to play at the end of the mass to announce the conclusion of the ceremonies. Until further evidence appears, these ideas will remain as mere conjectures.

Musical practices of a society often reflect the social structure of the time. The Christians' invitation to Hindu musicians to perform inside the church, especially during mass, and the willingness of the Hindus to accept the invitation tell volumes about the social harmony that existed between Christians and their Hindu neighbors in Kerala. Such permeability of socio-religious boundaries deeply offended the missionaries, who sincerely believed in the superiority of the Catholic religion over all other faiths. Therefore, the Synod pressured the St. Thomas Christians to redraw the Christian cultural and ritual boundaries within a predominantly Hindu society. To cite a few other examples, the Synod forbade the Christians from giving Hindu names to their children (session IV, decree XVI), from participating in the local Hindu festival of *ōnam* (session IX, decree IV), and from piercing their ears to wear ornaments like the Hindus (session IX, decree XVII).

There is another aspect of the decree under discussion that deserves attention. Two versions of the decrees of the Synod came into existence some time before 1603, one in Malayalam, the local language, and the other in Portuguese.<sup>7</sup> The original decrees that were read at the end of the Synod for approval of the participants were written in Malayalam. However, the Portuguese version contains thirty-five more canons that are not found in the original text;<sup>8</sup> the decree on the presence of Hindu musicians inside the church is one of them. There are two possible

<sup>6</sup> Although rarely executed today for practical reasons, the instructions are still part of the printed text in the Malayalam translation of the Syriac missal.

<sup>7</sup> Zacharia, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Antonio de Gouvea prepared the Portuguese version, *Synodo Diocesano da Igreja e Bispado de ngamale dos antigos christãos de Sam Thome das Serras do Malavar das partes da India Oriental* (Coimbra: Diogo Gomez Loureyro, 1606). Michael Geddes, the chaplain to the English factory in Lisbon (1678-88), prepared an English translation, *The History of the Church of Malabar, from the time of its being discover'd by the Portuguezes in the Year 1501* (London: Sam. Smith and Benj. Walford, 1694). A reprint of Geddes' translation with an introductory essay can be found in Zacharia.



reasons for the omission of the decree in the original text: either the issue was so sensitive to the St. Thomas Christians that Archbishop Menezes thought that an open discussion would have had a negative impact on the Synod,<sup>9</sup> or the Archbishop and his colleagues became aware of the issue only after the Synod. In any case, the Archbishop considered the issue so important as to include it in the Portuguese version. Whatever the case may be, the decree seems to have succeeded in achieving its goal, to some extent, because we do not hear about Hindu musicians playing instrumental ensembles inside the church in the subsequent period. However, their participation in church festivities has not ceased to exist. Either *panchawādyam* or *chentamēlam* or both are integral parts of the church processions during major feasts of the Syro-Malabar churches even today, and the performers of these ensembles are mostly Hindus. The photos in *Figures 2 & 3* were taken during the annual celebration of the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary at St. Mary's Forane Church at Pallippuram, in Kerala. As is seen in *Figure 2*, it is the Hindu instrumental players who lead the procession, placing themselves in front of the processional cross.

The missionaries probably disliked not only the presence of Hindu musicians but also the use of indigenous musical instruments inside the church, because of their association with the 'heathens' and their festivals. In the churches of Syriac Christians, built or rebuilt under the supervision of the missionary bishops in the seventeenth century, we find a new phenomenon: music iconography. In the wooden reredos of the main altars of some of these churches there are carved figures of angels playing musical instruments (see *Figure 4*). This was quite new at that time and, in fact, even strange, because the pre-sixteenth century churches in Kerala had no statues or any carved figures inside the church, not even a crucifix, but only a cross. The instruments represented are mostly violin, harp, bugle, triangle, bass drum, and tambourine. None of these instruments is indigenous, although the tambourine might have been familiar to the area because of the presence of Muslims in the region. The exclusion of instruments familiar to the region seems to be a matter of deliberate choice. The specific location of the iconography, too, seems to be a matter of deliberate choice. The iconography appears invariably in the sanctuaries of churches, either on the reredos or inside the dome above the main altar, and not on the sides or outside the walls of

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<sup>9</sup> The submission of the St. Thomas Christians to the inquisition of Goa (session III, decree XXII) is another example of the decrees added after the Synod.

the church. Those are crucial locations that represent heaven on earth, thus giving a heavenly status to the musical instruments. And, without exception, it is the angels, and not human figures, who play the instruments. This raises the prestige of the instruments and provides legitimacy to their use inside the church.



*Figure 4* Six angels playing musical instruments on the wooden reredos of the main altar of St. Mary's Forane Church, Pallippuram.

The missionaries probably used music iconography as an ingenious means to influence the minds of the worshipers. At the time of their representation in Kerala, the iconography provided a semblance of the future rather than a reflection of the present. It also implied, to some extent, value judgments on the existing musical practices of the Syriac Christians, and an invitation to break away from the past and to redefine the future by adopting more 'respectable' musical and religious practices of the West. Indeed, the strong suggestive power of the visual medium did have an effect on the church musicians. Three of those instruments, violin, triangle, and bass drum, soon became part of the Syriac choirs of the churches under the control of the missionaries. Those musical instruments can be heard even today in some of the Syro-Malabar churches in Kerala (see *Figure 5*).



Figure 5. The Syriac choir of St. Mary's Forane Church, Pallippuram. From left to right: Jose Paul Vathappallil (drum), Joy Paul Vathappallil (triangle), Paily Vathappallil (harmonium, lead singer), Joseph Pathiamoola (vocal), Ouseph Vathappallil (violin). October 2, 2000.

The presence of music iconography in Syro-Malabar churches has to be analyzed in view of their absence in the churches of the other sections of the St. Thomas Christians, who established their separate identity after the revolt against the religious hegemony of the Portuguese missionaries in 1653.

The time of the introduction of music iconography in the churches of Kerala coincides with the adaptation of paraliturgical services from the Latin rite, such as Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, novena to saints, and *ladinj* (Malayalam adaptation of the Portuguese word, *ladainha*, meaning 'litany') by the Syro-Malabar Church. The missionaries, with the help of local Syriac scholars, translated the Latin chants into Syriac for use in the Syriac churches under their control. This gave rise to a new and unique category of Syriac chants in Kerala. Musically, these chants are different from the earlier repertory of Syriac chants for the mass, the liturgy of the Hours, and the services for the dead. We shall examine two music examples from a recent release, *Qambel Māran: Syriac Chants from South India*.<sup>10</sup> I organized the re-

<sup>10</sup> *Qambel Māran: Syriac Chants from South India*, CD with 16-page booklet by Joseph J. Palackal, PAN 2085 (PAN Records, Netherlands, 2002).



cording of this CD in Kerala in August 1999. The texts in both examples are free translations of the famous hymn *Pange Lingua* ('Sing My Tongue') that St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) composed for the feast of Corpus Christi. In Kerala, as in the Latin rite, the chants were sung during Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. The accompanying instruments are harmonium, bass drum (known by its Portuguese name, 'tambor'), and triangle (pronounced *tiryānkōl* in Malayalam). The violin player could not participate in the recording as he was sick on that day.

Music example 1, track # 21, *śanbah leśān* ('Praise My Tongue'): A distinctive feature of this melody is its range of a complete octave, in contrast to the older Syriac melodies which, in general, have a limited range of about four to five notes. The melody gradually ascends a full octave to its climactic point at the upper tonic and then descends slowly, forming something like a bell-shaped curve. A few other melodic gestures that may be considered characteristics of Western musical style are also present in this chant. For example, the use of the raised fourth in an otherwise major scale and the leap of a perfect fourth in both ascending and descending manner are features seldom found in Syriac chants, especially those of the pre-Portuguese period. It is not yet clear if this was an adaptation of a Western chant melody.

Music example 2, track # 22, *kollan daśnē* ('Let Us All Offer'): This is the second chant for Benediction and consists of the last two stanzas of *Pange Lingua*. In the Latin rite, the chant is known as 'Tantum Ergo,' the first two words of the penultimate stanza. The Syriac translator, however, interpolates a line, which is either borrowed from a Syriac or Latin source, or composed anew. The line appears as a trope on the word *fides* in the first stanza: "By it [faith] we sail as in a ship, in this sea which is turbulent." A unique feature of the melody is its metric structure, known in South Indian classical music theory as *miśra chāpu tālam*. It has a total of seven beats divided into two sections (3 + 4) with accents on the first and the fourth beats.

To conclude, the chants tell us stories of communication between distant peoples and diverse cultures. A good example is the course of the chant in music example 2. St. Thomas Aquinas composed the text in Latin, in the thirteenth century; the Portuguese missionaries brought the chant to South India, some time in the sixteenth century; local scholars, with the help of missionaries, translated the Latin text into Syriac, a Semitic language, in Kerala; the translator interpolated a verse either composed by himself or borrowed from another unknown source into the



original Latin text; an anonymous local cleric or musician disregarded the original Western melody and decided to compose a new melody; in doing so, the composer adopted a metric structure that was popular in South India; the performers of the chant used musical instruments adopted or adapted from the West to accompany the melody; and the chant exists even today, at least in the treasured musical memory of a group of people in the Syro-Malabar Church.

This short survey of the history and music of the Syro-Malabar Christians of Kerala is a case in point for the mutuality of musical and historical inquiries in which musicological discourse assumes a significant role as a tool in historiography. Such an approach does not seem to have caught the attention of scholars who study Christianity in India. The survey is also intended as part of a larger project to reconstruct the history of Christian music in India. Considering the sheer variety and multiplicity of musical styles of Christians across the country, and the ongoing formation and transformation of those styles, such an endeavor might even lead to the development of a new field of study, which may be called Indian Christian musicology.