

MULTIFORMITY OF SYRIAN CHRISTIAN CULTURE IN KERALA

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Abstract

Like all other states in India, religions have played an important role in the cultural formation of Kerala. It is a land of various religious cultures. It has been showing toleration towards all cultures irrespective of native or foreign and absorbing all these without any discrimination. Consequently these cultures had merged into the existing culture and there was a cultural evolution. The Syrian Christians in Kerala generally believe that they can trace back their origin from the beginning of the religion itself. The Syrian Christians themselves claim that they are the descendants of native upper castes and trying to imitate their life styles in order to keep their social status in a caste-ridden society like Kerala. Though the Malankara Syrian Christians kept strong relations with different foreign churches they had kept their identity and remained within the fold of the Indian culture. We can see the influence of native culture in almost all their ways of life. Gradually they became the part and parcel of the Kerala Culture. It contains the streams of various cultures and reflects a rich culture of plurality. So this study aims to find out the multiformity of Syrian Christian culture in Kerala. The paper intends to study about salient features of this culture and to trace out how the social settings of Kerala have influenced it.

Keywords: *Multiformity, Syrian Christian, Malankara, Culture, Caste, Portuguese, Reformation.*

Introduction

Kerala, the southern state of the Indian peninsula has been hailed as the God's Own Country because of its natural beauty and glorious culture. The Malankara Syrian Christians, the traditional Christian community in Kerala has also contributed much to its cultural heritage. Culture of a community is closely interrelated with their religious customs and rituals, social and spiritual life, art and architecture, economy, political and geographical settings, etc. No art or cultural form is considered to be an invention but only an innovation of a form already existing.¹ Though the Syrian Christians had strong relations with different foreign churches they could keep their identity and develop a unique culture which went along with the existing one. The primary objective of the study is to trace out how the social settings of Kerala influenced the Syrian Christian culture. It also aims to understand the nature and features of the Syrian Christian culture in Kerala.

Formation of Syrian Christian Culture in Kerala

The Syrian Christians in Kerala have been following caste practices like purity, untouchability, etc.² In caste structure, they are placed between the Sudras and Thiyyas. Many of the Syrian Christians claim that they are the descendants of the Brahmins.³ They held the same social status of the upper caste Hindus. Because of the strong relations with the upper caste Hindus, the Christians followed the life and customs of the Hindus and even participated in temple festivals and temple art forms.⁴ The Malankara Christians had complete autonomy in their faith, practices and administration. But the Portuguese established Papal Supremacy over the Malankara church and interfered into the cultural life of the native Christians.⁵ It resulted in the fusion or transition of some art forms or culture. In some cases, they made attempts to give Biblical interpretations to the existing art forms. Some practices were declared as atheistic and discouraged their performances. As a result a new Christianized traditional Kerala culture gradually developed in Kerala.

Rituals and Practices

Ponnum Thenum

It is a traditional Hindu practice and adopted by the Christians that a new born baby is given a special food in which honey is mixed with grinded gold. The new born babies are given names, Biblical or Malayalam forms of the Biblical names at the time of their baptism.⁶ normally boys are given the names of their grandfathers and girls are given the names of grandmothers.⁷

Erupathiyettukettu, Chorroonu, Ezhuthinniruthu and Palukachel

The ceremony of *Erupathiyettukettu* (binding of girdle on the 28th day of the birth of a child) *Chorroonu*, (giving the first rice meal to a child), *Palukachel* (boiling of milk in connection with house-warming) are also celebrated by the both the Syrian Christians and the Hindus. These practices have not been observed by the Christians in any part of the world except in Kerala. Usually the practice *Ezhuthinniruthu* (initiation into the alphabet) is held in houses.⁸ *Palukachel* is performed by the Hindus as an offering of milk to Lord Krishna. The Syrian Christians have been practicing it as a symbol of prosperity

Marriage Customs

There are vivid marriage rituals like *Chanthamchartal* and *Mylanchiideel* among some Syrian Christians. The groom sits in a special chair in the weddingpandal and his cousins then smear him with oil and take off him to bathing with a colorful procession. This practice has been known as *Chantham chartal*.⁹ The song used at this occasion is known as *Marthomman Pattu*.¹⁰ At the same time, *Mylanchiideel* is held in bride's house. The ornate and well-dressed bride sits on a white cushioned seat. The *Mylanchi* (henna) paste is placed before the bride and then smears the henna paste on the body of the bride as described in the *Mylanchipattu*.¹¹

Marriages are conducted at church. In some areas a splendid wedding procession was arranged. They used different musical instruments, flags, crosses, Muthukkuda (decorated umbrella) etc.¹² The Syrian Christians accepted the Hindu custom, the binding of the *thali*, a flat triangular gold piece, inlaid with a tiny cross.¹³ After the marriage, there was a two-day celebration with music and feast. The mother of the bride received the new couples in her home like the Hindus with a lighted lamp.¹⁴ *Nalvathil*, the departure ceremony of the bride and groom into bride's house is the last part of their marriage celebration.¹⁵

Dress

In dress, they resembled the upper caste Hindus. Before the last century, their women usually wore full sleeved blouse and long dhoti. They covered their head with *neriyathu* (an upper cloth) while going to the church.¹⁶ They wore ornaments in ear, throat and hands. They never used ornaments on nose. Men used white cloth and tied a towel on their head. In the beginning men wore *kuduma* (a tuft of hair on the top of the head) like the upper caste Hindus.¹⁷ But they wore a cross on the *kuduma*.

Rituals related to death

The body was buried at the cemetery of the church. No one in the family of the deceased ate food before the burial after the burial, vegetarian food was given to the family members and close relatives. There were some practices like *Pulalike* the Hindus in which the family members of the deceased were treated as impure for a specific period. A special food was arranged on the 11th or 16th day of the death. *Chatham* or *Sradhamis* arranged on every death anniversaries.¹⁸

Language and Literature

The language used in worship is Syriac. Their educational contribution resulted in the renaissance in the socio-cultural life of the Kerala. In the field of art, much effort was taken in the field of music. But we can't see much progress in the field of poetry or drama. Warning of the Synod of Diampore in associating with the regional poetry¹⁹, the rigid observation of the Puritanism by the Protestants, aversion to the theme of romance and comedy etc. are some of the important reasons behind it. So the Christians are failed to develop Syrian-Malayalam like the Arabi-Malayalam by the Muslims. But the introduction of printing press and the importance given to Malayalam as the worship language since the reformation in Malankara church helped the steady growth of Malayalam language and literature.

Architecture

In the field of architecture, the Syrian Christians failed to develop a unique style. Their ancient churches reveal the Christianization of the temple architecture in its making. There

was a cross on the top roof. It had long flag posts and *Dwarapalakanmars* (gate keepers) like temples and *Nazranisthambam*, a big stone cross. It resembled with the *stambhams* erected by the Buddhists and Jains. Its base is built in the model of an altar in Hindu temples. These churches had also *Padippura* (Gate-house), *Padippuramalika* (doubled storied building) *Verandah*, *Manimalika* (bell-house), *Nadakasala* (theatre) etc. Since the 17th century there was Portuguese influence like *Melkkoora* (top roof), *Monthayam* (girder), *Melmach* (Top ceiling) pillars, etc. In temples these are made of stones, but in churches mostly used wood. The most important part of the church is the *Madhbaha* and Thrones (altare). Its style was the combination of traditional Kerala architecture and Persian theology. *Mukhavaram* (front elevation), side and top portions of the doors and windows are also decorated with plaster reliefs of several images such as hunting and fight scenes, dance, flora and fauna, angels, etc.²² It reveals the influence of the traditional art than the religious rituals and piety. Beautiful mural paintings on themes of Bible and church history on the walls of the church is a unique feature of the Syrian Christian churches.²⁰ Icons are also the part of Christian spiritual life. They believe that icons are the images of God's revelation to man. The *Mammodeesa Thotti* (Baptismal Pond) and church bells are deeply influenced by the Persian art. The Portuguese introduced a new architectural style in India. It was a combination of different European architecture style like Domes with Byzantine style of the Greeks, beautifully engraved Basilicas, cupola, pointed arch windows, Romanesque styled arches and thick and heavy stone walls.²¹ Mainly the architecture style of the Syrian Christians was influenced by four factors: the Vedic Brahmin culture, the Persian culture in west Asia, the Buddhist culture in Kerala and the European Renaissance culture. Only after the arrival of the British missionaries, the European renaissance influenced the Syrian Christian culture.

Christian Art Forms

Margamkali, *Parichamuttukali*, *Vattakali*, *Chavittunadakam*, *Poovirkkam* etc are important ancient art forms of the Syrian Christians. *Margamkali* is their major traditional art form. The works of Saint Thomas is the theme of *Margamkali*.²² *Parichamuttukali*, the martial art form of the Christians is closely related to the traditional *Kalaripayattu* system. *Vattakali* is related to the social life of the Christians particularly with their marriage. *Poovirkkam* was another ancient art form of the Christians.²³ *Chavittunadakam* is considered as the first popular theatre art in Kerala. It was originated due to the influence of Portuguese. It is a mixture of the styles of the *Mudiyet* and *Kathakali* on the one side and the European Opera on the other.²⁴

Conclusion

The social settings of Kerala influenced the culture of the Syrian Christian culture deeply. They never wanted to become a lower community in Kerala where a caste-ridden and discriminating society was prevailed. So they tried to imitate the life style and culture of the upper caste Hindus in every walks of their life. They deliberately accepted the images of the upper castes' culture in their social and religious expressions and tried to give Christian perspectives to it. The Christians did not create a parallel culture or counter culture but they identified and integrated with the existing culture. 'While in Rome, be a Roman' is a familiar statement and like that the Christians in India are bound to accept the customs and manners here with variations. They are more or less Indian in Culture, Christian in Religion, and Oriental in Worship. It was deeply influenced by not only the native Hindu culture but Buddhism, Jainism, Persian and European cultural images also. We can see the images of nationalism and traditional culture in Christian social life. In fact, the Syrian Christian culture in Kerala is more or less acquired. The Syrian Christians in Kerala could develop a culture in Kerala which reflects the images of their social life rather than their faith. But they tried to give a religious colour to it for keeping their social status and identity in their living circumstances. The statement - 'culture is not invented, but it is an innovation of existing culture' - is true about the Syrian Christians as well. Though most of their traditional cultural symbols have been disappeared due to the influence of modern culture some of them have been still prevailing with modifications or have been observed in one or another form.

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