

# THEATRICAL AND FOLK TRADITIONS OF KERALA CHRISTIANS

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The Thomas Christians or Syrian Christians are perhaps the most ancient of the Christians of Kerala. They claim to be the descendants of the converts of the Apostle. They follow the traditions of the Hindus in almost every respect, such as customs and manners, social organisations, art and architecture, literature, cultural activities, etc. Due to certain socio-religious and economic reasons, however, they have been kept out of the artistic and cultural activities of the Hindu community in Kerala. The main reasons for this exclusion is the Christian hierarchy who did not allow the Syrian Christians to mingle with the Hindus in their temple centred artistic performances. The religious festivals, music concerts and art forms such as *Kuttu*, *Kudiyattam*, *Mudiyerru*, *Krishnanattam*, etc. were for a long time strictly forbidden to Syrian Christians. This was made clear in the decrees of the Synod of Diamper in 1599.<sup>1</sup> In former times the Syrian Christians, in common with the members of the various Hindu castes, used to dance on occasions like marriages and other social festivities, but they were stopped by the authorities of the Church on the plea of indecorum. A number of *Kalyana Pattukal* (marriage songs), *Palli Pattukal* (songs related to the history of churches), *Rabban Pattu Margam Kali* etc. formed part of their traditional cultural heritage.

## 1. Folk Songs:

There are a number of folk songs in Malayalam composed by the Christians on marriage festivities. These however are now current in Travancore area only. They throw much light on the the various interesting customs and manners connected with marriages and other socio-religious ceremonies.

More than three hundred folk songs were popularised in the 16th and 17th centuries. Songs were composed of a number of Syrian, Latin, Tamil words. Biblical themes were illustrated in these songs. Historical songs

were written mainly for the purpose of church history and lives of priests and bishops. Every church had its own historical song with detailed description of its construction, religious importance etc. These songs play a great role in the history of the church, particularly the St. Thomas tradition. All sects of Christians have their own folk songs.

### Songs of Women:<sup>2</sup>

(a) *Marthomman Pattu*.—This deals with the life and activities of the Apostle, Thomas.

(b) *Mayilanchi Pattu*.—Songs sung as the girl is painted with a paste of Henna leaves. The description is based on the Biblical Story of Adam and Eve in the paradise of Eden.

(c) *Nalloru Orsalem*.—Historical narration of the city of Jerusalem. A King has decided to walk in the footsteps of the Apostle Thomas. He and his followers set sail from their own country and arrive at Cochin where they are well received. They next go to Crangannore, the ancient capital of Kerala. Here also they are welcomed by the Perumal who confers on the King many honours and privileges along with a house and a compound for his and his servants residence.

(d) *Ayni Pattu*.—Song refers to the bringing of bread by the bridegroom's sister to the church to be given to the married couple and to others.

(e) *Vattakkali Song*.—Mangalyam (Happy Wedding) *Vattakkali* (dance incircles), *Ettuthura Vattakkali*, *I'azhu Pattu*, *Adachuthura Pattu*, *Ennappattu*, *Kuli Pattu*, *Vilakkuthodal Pattu* were accompanied by a variety of dances. After the marriage, the married couple were welcomed in a decorated Pandal with music and dance.

(f) *Pallippattukal*.—Historical songs dealing with the details of the construction of ancient churches. "Nalu Palli Pattu" is a collection of famous songs. They include the following churches : Changancherry, Kottayam Cheriya Palli, Puthupally, Piravam, Uzhavoor, Kaippuzha, Kallon Kallu, Kallissery, Kaduthuruth, Punnathura, Kuravilangadu, Palayur, Crangannore, Chepad, Paravoor, Kokkamangalam, Niranam, Kollam, Chayal etc. Actually they are the historical records of these churches.

(g) *Rabban Pattu*.—*Rabban Pattu* was published by F. X. Ricca. The text is a reduction of this original in modern language by Thomas Rabban Maliakal, the 48th priest of this family whose compound in Niranam can be seen even today. Many songs attached to important churches are still preserved in Kerala. St. Thomas tradition of Christianity is found in the oral tradition of these songs.

Marriage songs of Kananaya Christians, featuring their social life, were published by Tony Mathew in 1980.

(h) *Funeral Elegies*.—Latin Christians of Kerala used to sing certain funeral elegies while visiting a house where a death has taken place. These songs are sung by the traditional singers among the community who will be paid for it. The content of these songs deals with the life and activities of Jesus Christ laying stress on the sacrifices and tortures undergone by him. It is customary that these songs will be sung throughout until the coffin is taken out for the funeral procession. This socio-religious custom is still observed among the Latin Christians called *Kannokku*.

These *Kannokku* songs are rendered in Tamil and follow the pattern of recitals closely associated with Liturgical Music of Christians. The tone in which these songs are sung evokes sorrow and a sense of religious spirit.

This socio-religious custom has taken its antiquity from the tribal people of Kerala such as Paraya, Pulaya and others. Their *Chaakkadu* denotes the same. Latin Christians owe much to the down trodden communities of Kerala in this regard.

The Syrian Christians also follow similar practices. They sing Arnos Padiri's *Chathuranyam* consisting of four cantos with special significance to *Marana Parvam*. The main theme of the poem is the excitement of a man nearing death; his thoughts on the two places where his spirit is likely to spend the rest of its time, viz. Heaven and Hell. This traditional practice is the salient feature of the Christian way of life.

*Ammanai Pattukal* of Tamil were widely sung by Latin Christians in their annual church festivals and social ceremonies. *Devamatha Ammanai* is another important song often rendered by them. *Thembavani* Songs of Father Beschi in Tamil were sung traditionally in Kerala among Latin rite.

#### (ii) Folk Theatre.

(a) *Margamkali*.—It is a sort of group dance depicting the traditional heritage of Syrian Christians. The theme of this art form is centralised around the life and mission of St. Thomas, and is in essential an integral part of marriage functions and church festivities.

The text of *Margam Kali* is made up of fourteen *padas* or stanzas. It was composed in the popular Malayalam metric patterns namely *Kakali*, *Unakkali*, *Misrakakali* etc. But the composition of the songs do not strictly conform to the rules of these metrical patterns.<sup>3</sup>

The music of *Margam Kali* songs is akin to that of the chanting of Syrian

liturgy. No musical instruments were used for providing accompaniments. *Asan* recites the first *padam* (Stanza) of the song and actors repeat the same. In later period new trends in music like *Vanchippattu* etc. were also adapted in *Margam Kali*.

The performance of *Margam Kali* is divided into two parts: *Vattakkali* and *Parijamuttu Kali*. The first part is mainly concerned with the song. The second part is purely a martial dance with sword and shield. A band of twelve persons who stand around lightened oil lamps recite and perform the folk drama.

P. U. Lukkose has collected almost all the major songs of *Margam Kali*. Thomas Makil, Dr. P. J. Thomas, T. M. Chummar, Chummar Choondal have also made studies on various aspects of *Margam Kali*.

(b) *Chivittunatakam*, During the 16th century, Kerala witnessed different phases of their socio-cultural and religious activities. They provide instances of direct Western involvement in the cultural life of the natives. European invaders were chiefly motivated by their interests of colonial expansion and economic exploitation. While the English and the Dutch did not deem it necessary to impose upon the local Christian community their own cultural heritage, the Portuguese, due to a variety of complex circumstances, made their impact felt in the cultural field also. The *Chavittunatakam*, the new Western theatrical art form is the shining example of the Portuguese contribution to the Indian theatre. *Chavittunatakam*, which bears the stamp of foreign influence, opened new vistas of development for the theatrical arts of Kerala.

*Chavittunatakam* synthesises the religious, cultural, social and artistic aspects of Christianity in Kerala. The meaning and purpose of *Chavittunatakam*, the foreign elements underlying its production and stage presentation, its definite artistic intention, and the manner in which it evolved through a combination of several elements of drama such as make up, costume, music and choreography are discussed here briefly.

Dr. K. M. George<sup>4</sup> makes the following comment : "Drama as we now understand and use the term, is by and large a borrowed form of art in Kerala. We have already indicated the influence of Sanskrit in the early stage of the evolution of the dramatic literature in Malayalam. Even before this, drama had in a way found its way to Kerala. The Portuguese who came to Kerala as early as the 16th century, were responsible for introducing *Chavittunatakam* which is a type of play similar to the Miracle plays of the West. 'Genoa', 'Karalman' and 'Napoleon' are some of the better known plays of this type. The use of costumes, masks and curtains for the stage were novelties in Kerala. However, the literary quality of the songs and the dialogues in *Chavittunatakam* were rather low. The movements of the actors on the stage arrest our

attention as that of acrobats. They are more vigorous than graceful, more martial than artistic. Those who did not possess enough technical knowledge to appreciate Kathakali supported and encouraged this early attempt of dramatic portrayal in the 18th and 19th centuries. It was in a way the Christian counterpart of Kathakali, which was reared on Hindu puranic stories."

Mrs. Sebeena Raphy<sup>5</sup> has attempted to find out the authors of the plays. The name of Chinnathambi Annavi stands out conspicuously as a composer of Chavittunatakam. According to the oral tradition among the artists, this man, who belonged to Tamilnadu, composed Chavittunatakam and propagated the art. Various names have been suggested as composers of Chavittunatakam but on a close scrutiny it is found that they are only scribes who transcribed these plays. The scripts might have originally been written in Tamil and changed while passing from hand to hand.

Themes of Chavittunatakam are of four kinds : (1) Historical (2) Biblical (3) Religious and (4) Social. The purpose is to educate the Christian folk. They convey the message of Christianity through moral-oriented stories. The themes selected for Chavittunatakam abide by the religious doctrines of Christianity. These might have been popularised with the support and influence of the west.

The language of Chavittunatakam does not appear to be descended directly from the literary tradition of Kerala. The influence of Tamil can be seen both in form and content. The distinctive features of '*Pattu*' are observed quite closely in *Chavittunatakam*, with of course its own peculiarity of language.

Actors of *Chavittunatakam* are trained in 'Kalaries'. In Chavittunatakam, the martial element is very much predominant. Sword play is an indispensable factor in the play. The fighting in '*Portaru*' is quite attractive. There are group fights of 20 to 30 actors at a time on the stage. The 'Kings' do not actively take part in the fight. The 'Ministers' lead the army. The fighting continues for half an hour and is often attractive enough to keep the audience spellbound.

The staging of this play usually takes place in the rural areas on happy occasions such as Christmas, Easter, Patron Saint's Day and anniversaries of socio-religious organisations under the churches. *Chavittunatakam* troupes belonged to the Province of Varapoly had the Diocese of Alleppey and Quilon. In former days all these Latin dioceses had the tradition of Chavittunatakam. At present it is seen abundantly in coastal areas of Cochin and Quilon. The Latin community among the Christians preserve this art form

as a traditional and ancestral property among them. They alone participate in this theatrical performance.

The costumes, make-up and stage settings are almost entirely influenced by the Western tradition. A unique feature noticed in this art form is its accent on the costumes, make-up and stage-settings even at the expense of some other important factors that constitute a good play,

Choreographic steps are given less importance in *Chavittunatakam*. The movement punctuates the words in the song and the dialogue; not always in meaningful gestures. Certain movements of the opera are also seen in *Chavittunatakam*. Foreign as well as indigenous elements are mixed up in this theatre.

Music is an indispensable accompaniment of *Chavittunatakam*. The influence of Terukkuttu songs is seen with corrupted form of Ragas and Talas of Carnatic music. *Chavittunatakam* has a fascinating choral music which shows the features of polyphonic chanting. Musical instruments in *Chavittunatakam* are such as Chenda, Tampuru, Elathalam, Harmonium, Clarinet, side-drum, Fiddle, Dolakku, Jalra, etc. The instruments in this play vary in accordance with local influence.

Women are not allowed to participate in the play. Men impersonate women. *Chavittunatakam* is performed on an open stage of 30ft. width and 100 ft. length generally. The planks on the stage are fixed so as to produce a drum-like sound at the foot-fall of the actors on the stage. About forty to sixty actors usually participate in it according to the nature of the theme. *Karalman Natakam*, (story of Charlemagne) is one of the famous and lengthy plays, and it is staged sometimes continuously for three to seven days. The literary as well as the historical evidences establish that *Chavittunatakam* has migrated from Tamilnadu to Kerala.

The texts which are used for the production of *Chavittunatakam* have come from Tamilnadu as the biproduct of the missionary work. Literary as well as historical evidences establish this view point. The basis rudiments of content, costume and presentation of *Chavittunatakam* can even now be visibly traced in some of the christian theatrical arts of Tamilnadu. *Allesu Natakam*, and *Muvarasu Natakam* have definite overtones on *Chavittunatakam* in many respects.

The theatre of *Chavittunatakam* is not confined to Kerala only, it is also seen in Tamilnadu and in Ceylon. *Muravasu Natakam*, *Allesu Natakam* and other religious dramas were popularised where ever the missionaries concentrated their activities in Tamilnadu such as Madurai, Tirunelveli, Palayamottah, Salem, Coimbatore (Swarappara, Athikkodu, Kozhinjampara) are predominantly Tamil speaking areas in the border line of Kerala.

The traditional *Annavis* of Tamilnadu call it as *Terukkuttu*. The above said plays are only seen among Latin convert christian villages in Tamilnadu. The texts of these plays carry almost all the characteristics of *Chavittunatakam* in the language aspect.

### III. Sinhalese Nadagama.

Some of the striking similarities of *Chavittunatakam* can be seen in *Sinhalese Nadagama* a form of dramatic entertainment that appears to have come into vogue about the nineteenth century. *Nadagamas* are still performed sometimes in Roman Catholic villages, during the festive seasons.

"*Nadagam* could be termed as folk opera, in the sense that they are enacted almost entirely in the medium of song. But in the *Nadagama* there is, besides, a certain element of drama. The stock characters dance in a particular manner, and all the other characters have a set movement to perform upon entry. Stylised movement is also used to depict certain actions, and there is a Narrator who describes incidents that cannot be brought on the stage."

As in *Chavittunatakam*, the christian stories and christian sentiments expressed in the plays indicate this with sufficient certainty. *Jnanaśaudan*, *Katarina Kutava*, *Sihalkki Nadagama*, *Ahalapola Nadagama*, *Iyujin*, *Salestina Nadagama*, *Raja Tunkattuwa* were some of the Sinhalese dramas written by Christian authors. These morally oriented stories deal with the life and activities of the European Emperors and their conversion to Christian faith as in the case of *Chavittunatakam*.

The earliest *Nadagamas* were written in Tamil and then translated into *Sinhalese*. The *Nadagama* is a lyrical play largely of verses and songs. The verses are in Tamil metres and are chanted without measured time. *Viruttam*, commonest among the Tamil metres is employed frequently in the text. Other Tamil metres used in *Nadagama* are the *Innise*, *Kalippa*, *Kavi*, *Koccakam*, *Venba* and *Parani*. It is believed that a few of the melodies are borrowings from Roman Catholic church music, known locally as *Kantaru*. The *Sinhalese Nadagama* appears to have been patterned originally, on a variety of South Indian Folk plays known as *Terukkuttu* in the Tamilnadu. *Nattukuttu* is performed in a circular *mantapa* having a conical roof. The audience which sits on the base ground segment of the circle would be separated by a curtain which is held in place by two people as each actor enters the *mantapa* from behind. Actors come in dancing as they are introduced and move in a circle inside the *mantapa*. The presenter, or *Annavi*, stands with the singers and musicians close to the entrance and often in the centre of the *mantapa*. The King enters while the heralds are still on the stage, and is accompanied by one or two of his ministers and royal retinue. He moves around with a dignified step and sits on the throne, while the attendants fan him and the *Annavi*

(the presenter) chant what is known as the *Asana Viriduva*. The characters sing of their doings and their intentions, and sometimes declaim a prose sentence or two after they have sung. The prose portion is styled *Vacane* or *Vasagam*. It usually takes about a week to enact an entire play.

Sarachandra<sup>6</sup> says : "Although the Sinhalese Nadagama is ultimately the descendant of this type of South Indian Folk Drama, it has not come to us directly from any of these sources. The immediate ancestor of our *Nadagama* is that form of *Terukkuttu* which was performed in the Tamil language in certain parts of Jaffna by the Roman Catholics, and which underwent certain modifications in their hands. Although the structure of these plays was the same as of the Tamil *Kuttus*, the Roman Catholics employed themes set in a background of Christian Society, expressed in Christian sentiments in the invocatory stanzas and throughout the plays, and introduced fresh stock characters. A Roman Catholic *Nadagama* begins with the *Annavi* and his chorus chanting a verse entitled *Kappu*. The *Kappu* gives a brief introduction and mentions the subject of the play. Next comes a character known as *Pulasanctor*, carrying a scroll in the hand, and dressed like an angel in long flowering robes, with a crown of flowers on his head. Next in order of presentation of *Kattiyakkaran* is the Herald. He announces the arrival of the King, who enters presently, accompanied by the *Konangi* or *Komali*. He sends the herald to fetch his chief minister, and asks him in the usual manner, news about the Kingdom and his subjects. The play then begins".

The present author has had no occasion of witnessing the performance of the Sinhalese *Nadagama* and has hence had to rely entirely on the excellent study made by Sarachandra on this subject to draw certain hypotheses regarding the striking similarities obvious in the *Nadagama* and *Chavittunatakam*. In theme, characterisation, language, presentations the parallels are too obvious to be overlooked. The role of *Kattiyakkaran* and *Annavi* in *Nadagama* are exactly similar to those of their counter parts in *Chavittunatakam*. Metrical pattern is also the same. So it could not be mere speculative adventure to draw the conclusion that the *Nadagama* is also a different form of the Portuguese art form brought to India.

*Martial tradition.* The martial tradition has been predominant among the Christian community too. The landlord and the feudal chieftains among them construct their *Kalai*, the institution for physical training in their house premises and give systematic training for them. The *Kalari Asan* or *Gurukkal* were invited from among the veteran families of the art from Malabar.

The training which the *Kalari* imparts aims at suppleness of the body and agility of limbs, qualities which are essential in trials of strength. *Angam*, muchan practice with *Cheruvadi* or *Kuruvadi*, a short stick  $1\frac{1}{2}$ " in diameter and three spans of  $1\frac{1}{2}$  to 2 feet in length and other martial items. The



rudiments of this martial training are fully employed in *Chavittunatakam*, *Parisamuttukali* and *Margamkali*.

*Portaru* (war scene) in *Chavittunatakam* is quite attractive. There are dreadful fights and group fights of 20 to 30 actors on the stage. They stand face to face in two parallel rows with swords and shields. In these scenes they use both the methods of *Kalaripayattu*, indigenous fighting and foreign sword and shield play.

*Parisamuttukali*, sword and shield dance is also practiced by the Christians. They perform this martial dance on marriages and other festive occasions. Margam Kali of Syrian Christians show the talents in the fight with the demonstration of the Sword and Shield. This traditional war like fighting qualities are prevalent more among the Latins than the Syrians.

*Socio-political life.* Francis Day<sup>7</sup> gives detailed account on the socio-political life of the Latin Christians. The four Latin Catholic castes, are, at the present time, divided in the following manner. The first, the *Aravattinallukar* (the community of the sixty four) are said to have consisted originally of converted Brahmins and Nairs. The second, the *Munnuttikkar* (Three hundred) are the Latins or Topasses, so named from wearing hats and believed to have mostly sprung from the domestic slaves. The third, the *Annutukar* (Five hundred) are known to have originally sprung from Mukkuvas or converted fishermen, and other low caste people. They generally call themselves Maplas. The fourth, the *Elumurrakar* (Seven hundred) are the descendants of the soil slaves. The Kattanars or priests are generally taken from the second or the fourth of these communities.

The name "Seven Hundred" is not an old one, for it is not found in the old records of the churches or of the state nor included in the conditions of the treaty between the Dutch and the Cochin Government. The two communities "Seven Hundred" and "Five Hundred" were under protection of Portugues and the Dutch. The former were trained in the art of war, 700 soldiers under each commandant. There are several versions about the origin of the Seven Hundred. The members of the community are called *Latinites*, *Lattinkar* in Malayalam. Mappilas, the honorific title was given to them, in contradiction to Syrian Maappilaas. They are also called *Margakkar*. They were also termed as *Mundukar* during the Dutch period. *Mundukar* or persons who were *Mundu* used puggeries or turbans for head dress. Topasses (another sub-division) wore drawers and used hats. "Seven Hundred" is made up of the low caste converts from Ezhuvas, Pulayas, Parayas and the Syrians very much conducting themselves as Syrians Priest.<sup>8</sup>

Some elderly gentlemen belonging to the Seven Hundred, on being interviewed, proudly stated that they were descendants of the militant group among Latinites who possessed the real tradition of *Chavittunatakam*. This fact is corroborated by the historical data because the Seven Hundreds are predominantly seen in the villages where *Chavittunatakam* troupes are

prevalent even now namely Crangannur, Mathilakam, Kara, Thiruthippuram, Gorthuruth, Pallippuram, Kunnammavu, Manompadi, Malippuram, Narakkal, Chathnad, Mulavukad, Vallarpadam, Pizhala, Vaduthala, Panambukad, Kumblam, Mattacherry, Soudi, Manancherry, Chellannam etc. L. K. Ananthakrishna Iyer,<sup>9</sup> also quotes these villages as the areas of *Chavittunatakam* tradition.

*Festivals.* The festivals of Christians are celebrated mainly in honour of Saints under whose patronage the churches have been established. They are called "*Perunnal*" (*Tirunnal*) in Malayalam.

The feast of St. Sebastian (*Ambuperunnal*) is celebrated throughout Kerala in a colourful way in the month of January-February. He is the patron Saint who is supposed to cure the small-pox. Hindus also participate in the church festivals and present their offerings to the church.

Feast of the glorious Apostle St. Thomas is celebrated with devotion and religious spirit on 3rd July in Malayattur. Pilgrim songs were sung by the devotees during the festival season.

Each Parish has its own festival and celebrates with high devotion and religious spirit.

These festivals are the occasions for marketing house hold articles. It is an annual gathering of the villagers in the church. The Christian festivals resemble the Hindu festivals in some respects. They prepare some special food preparations namely Appam, Vada, as offerings. The clergy men have to give due respect and importance to the local people on the day of festivals. Communal feasts will be conducted on a large scale during the festival days. Agricultural labourers of the Parish present their crops to the church. Church festivals and celebrations were conducted with greater enthusiasm and lavishness of expenditure. These festivals were not merely manifestations of religious fervour, they served as occasions for exhibitions of the Parishioners social amity, concord among the villagers.

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