

## Possibilities of Understanding Jewish Malayalam Folksongs

*By Scaria Zacharia*

Jewish Malayalam Folk Songs (JMFS), a repertoire of about 250 songs available in notebooks and audio recordings, have been under serious interdisciplinary investigation during the last three decades. An international project with theoretical and methodological inputs from anthropology, folklore, linguistics, ethnomusicology, performance studies, women studies, and translation studies has been in progress. Scholars with specialization in Indology, Malayalam studies, and Jewish studies are actively involved in this project headed by Dr. Barbara Johnson (Ithaca College) and sponsored by the Ben Zvi Institute of Hebrew University, Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> A pioneering volume of 50 songs is planned for publication. An anthology of about 50 songs of the same repertoire was published in German translation in May 2002. The Hebrew translations also includes 50 songs. A larger volume with English translations is under preparation.<sup>2</sup> The Jewish music Research Centre of Hebrew University, Jerusalem, is also producing a CD of Jewish Malayalam folk songs.

### Folk Process

This repertoire of Malayalam songs is the possession of Malayalam-speaking Jewish women. At the time of the formation of the modern state of Israel and the subsequent migration of Kerala Jews to Israel, the Malayalam-speaking Jews numbered about 2,500. American and Israeli researchers, especially anthropologists, who conducted research studies in Kerala Jewish settlements in Israel, collected several notebooks containing JMFS. They also recorded some of the songs as sung by elder women of the community. These recordings are available in the music archives of Jerusalem. The notebooks give textual status to JMFS, but the primary form of transmission remains oral. Jewish women who perform these songs have the difficult task of reconciling different textual and oral traditions at every performance. The process involves consultations, decision making, evolution of leadership, phonation of songs, and harmonization of tunes. Among groups of Jewish women, this process is marked by a sense of equality, dynamism of dialogue, and motivation for aesthetic excellence. The folk process of group singing is facilitated in spite of different textual traditions and singing practices supported by different notebooks and different synagogue communities. This corpus of songs, as David Shulman observes, "has a unique status in both the history of Jewish literature and in that of South Indian oral traditions."<sup>3</sup>

### **Kerala Experience**

This paper is a modest attempt to contextualize JMFS by examining the language use in these songs with a view of relating them to illocutionary intent. In doing this, we are looking for the archeology of knowledge and its contemporary performance in these songs. Archeology as an interpretative system gives information, discernment, and wisdom by examining the remnants of the past with a heightened sense of its multi-layered structure. As part of the investigation, we wish to clarify the religious identification of Kerala as a dialogic community with particular reference to its performance of identity and subjectification. In other words, performance of JMFS is interpreted as a communicative action. This is prompted by theoretical and methodological developments in humanities and social sciences. The theoretical contributions of Michael Foucault, Michael Bakhtin, Allen Dundes, Richard Bauman, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, and Asa Berg have been the main sources of inspiration, though they are seldom mentioned by name. The historical and cultural investigations of Kerala scholars such as M.G.S. Narayanan and the state-of-the art of cultural studies and Malayalam linguistics in modern Kerala also support this type of an inquiry. The explicit theme of this paper is that the JMFS, like many other cultural artifacts of Kerala, represent the hyphenated society of Kerala, which is constantly engaged in dialogic communication. The illocutionary effect of JMFS is Kerala experience. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen recently interpreted this experience in the following words:

However, there is further need for causal discrimination in interpreting Kerala's experience. There are other special features of Kerala which may also be relevant, such as female ownership of property for an influential part of the Hindu population (Nairs), openness to and interaction with the outside world (with the presence of Christians — about a fifth of the population — who have been much longer in Kerala — since around fourth century — than they have been in say, Britain, not to mention Jews who came to Kerala shortly after the fall of Jerusalem), and activist left-wing politics with a particularly egalitarian commitment, which has tended to focus strongly on issues of equity (not only between classes, but also between women and men).

### **Genres and Versions**

JMFS include songs belonging to different genres. They can be classified according to themes or forms of performance styles. Some of the songs have different versions in different notebooks and they are sung with different tunes. Most of the versions can be identified with different synagogue communities. About thirty notebooks now available belong to six different synagogue commu-

nities: Paradesi (Kochi), Thekkumbagam (Kochi), Kadavumbagam (Kochi), Thekkumbagam (Ernakulam), Chennamangalam, and Parur. The oral traditions of Mala and Kadavumbagam (Ernakulam) are also attested, but no notebook belonging to them has been identified. Many variations as attested by the notebooks are community-specific. This is most interesting for students of cultural studies and critical linguistics. Cultural Studies looks for the performance of identity in cultural forms. There is performance of identity in JMFS at two levels. At the bottom level, songs can be identified as belonging to a particular synagogue community. One can speak of versions of Paradesi, Parur, or Kadavumbagam. At a different level, these songs perform Jewish and Kerala identities. The present investigator's primary concern is the circuit of culture in JMFS involving production, consumption, regulation, representation, and identity. Examining these songs in the circuit of culture permits a better understanding of the value of the JMFS. After the migration of the Kerala Jews to Israel during the last 50 years, the significance of these songs has changed dramatically. A contemporary study of JMFS must take into account this break in the tradition. For reasons that are quite evident, we are theorizing on JMFS from a typical Kerala point of view. The linguistic and literary system of Malayalam also helps illuminate the signification of JMFS.

### Origin Songs

One of the major categories of JMFS is historical songs. Some of the songs in this category are treated as origin songs — they trace the origin and development of Kerala Jews through divergent narratives and discourses. One must clarify that the idea of history as a collection of facts is not relevant here. One cannot treat any of these songs as reflections of past events. In fact, there is a group of songs in this category maintained only by the Paradesi community that makes deliberate attempts to give the appearance of factuality. These songs reassert their historicity by including citations from Jewish copper plates. Considering their pedantic nature, we are not including these songs in the anthology of Jewish Malayalam songs. One cannot rule out their folk nature, but we have postponed them for careful analysis. There are other songs with historical themes shared by different synagogue communities and available in different versions in different notebooks. They are valuable as folk songs and can be subjected to folkloristic, literary, and cultural methodologies for scientific investigation. They do not contain historical statements and cannot be validated by traditional historical methods. At best, these songs may be treated as representations of a past, the imagined past. But they are very important, since they are the representations of folk consciousness. They represent the *We* of the songs and that is the authenticity of the statements. They provide a path to Kerala Jewish subjectivity as determined by local specificities. As we can see today in the JMFS, the key element of this

subjectivity is the play of the *We* and the *other* in these songs. These songs semiotically and semantically represent the social dynamics and social formations of Kerala society.

### **Hyphenated Society**

We would like to call this a hyphenated society. A hyphenated society like a hyphenated compound has components with clearly marked boundaries, but it works like a single unit in bigger formations. So is the working of Kerala society, which has distinct local communities and distinct religious groups. Religious groups such as the Jews, Christians, and Muslims had several subgroups that were and are networking to form larger religious groups. The regional groups that cut across religious differences also network with distinct identity. Subsequently, several *Jatis* (castes) that cut across religious and political divisions maintained their distinctiveness. Buddhism and Jainism lost their distinctiveness in the mainstream of Kerala Hinduism, but Semitic religions were accepted as distinct groups — not as a necessary evil but as a blessing. Dr. M.G.S. Narayanan labels this as cultural symbiosis to emphasize the distinctiveness and networking of these religious groups. We prefer the term hyphenation. So the hyphenated society of Kerala is represented in JMFS, especially in historical songs.

### **Parrot Songs**

Now let us examine two versions of a popular song in JMFS called *Kilipatt* (parrot song). Nine versions of this song are available — five versions from Paradesi notebooks and two from Kadavumbagam (Kochi). Considering internal and external evidences, these seven versions can be grouped together as Kochi versions. Two notebooks collected from the Parur community, a prominent Jewish community with long and rich traditions on the mainland, have a distinct version of parrot song. Let us call this Parur version. Now we shall examine these two versions:

#### ***Parrot Song — Kochi***

Milk with fruit shall be given — Ayyayya  
 To you lovely bird — Ayyayya  
 The fruit from the branch — Ayyayya  
 I shall pluck, and I shall give to you — Ayyayya  
 For telling some good news — Ayyayya

I shall pluck and give to you, parrot — Ayyayya  
 Like this at one time — Ayyayya

The bird had just started flying — Ayyayya  
Seeing the bird as it was coming — Ayyayya  
A hunter came and interfered — Ayyayya  
The bird turned pale — Ayyayye  
Struck by the arrow of the hunter — Ayyayya  
It fell down trembling — Ayyayya  
See the affliction of the bird — Ayyayya  
For the sake of the fruit from the branch — Ayyayya  
Near the seashore of Palur — Ayyayya  
It saw (type of?) trees — Ayyayya  
The bird went and bathed — Ayyayyaa  
Another high place — Ayyayya  
Was found in which to perch. — Ayyayya  
A splendid green mansion, — Ayyayya  
An umbrella of fine stones, — Ayyayya

There the bird flew and perched — Ayyayya

*Parrot Song — Parur*

Here is milk and fruit — Ayyayya

Oh, parrot, I shall give them to you — Ayyayya

I shall pluck and give to you, — Ayyayya  
Oh parrot, I shall give to you — Ayyayya  
Listen, there was a forest flowing with milk, — Ayyayya  
There birds were sitting high in a row — Ayyayya  
There they dwelt, the five colored parrots, — Ayyayya  
Birds in a golden cage — Ayyayya  
Those who saw them (their beauty?) rejoiced — Ayyayya  
They dwelt (to see them dwelling?) in a golden forest — Ayyayya

Then the coming of the hunter was sighted — Ayyayya

Then they were caught in a mighty net — Ayyayya  
They fell down struggling, flapping in anguish (?) — Ayyayya  
The netted fell down. The freed flew away — Ayyayya  
Remembering, can one bear this thought? — Ayyayya  
Remembering, can one suffer this suffering? — Ayyayya  
Leaving the forest, they divided (separated) — Ayyayya

According to their different types (groups?) — Ayyayya  
 Ten parrots came together — Ayyayya  
 Those who suffered the quarrel — Ayyayya  
 Lost their feathers in the mutual pecking — Ayyayya  
 The Palur sea knew it — Ayyayya  
 The short palm trees saw it — Ayyayya  
 All the birds sat in a row — Ayyayya  
 They saw the hunter coming — Ayyayya  
 Fluttering they flew away — Ayyayya

The shrubs in the forest saw it — Ayyayya

All the parrots flew, carrying what they had plucked — Ayyayya  
 Leaving the forest, they ended up at the sea — Ayyayya  
 Those parrots were sitting high — Ayyayya  
 Hearing this, one loses control — Ayyayya

#### **Performance of Identity**

At the very outset, the chronotop (time + space) makes these versions distinct. In the Kochi version and Parur version, birds are moving. And they are moving from one place to another. In the Kochi version, they are moving from difficulties to difficulties and finally settle down in a "splendid green mansion." But in the Parur version, birds begin their journey from "a forest flowing with milk" where "the birds were sitting high in a row."

There they dwelt — the five colored parrots  
 Birds in a golden cage  
 Those who saw them rejoiced  
 They dwelt in a golden forest

So according to the Parur version, birds were in a state of glory at the beginning. This version continues to narrate the subsequent stories as a fall. The poem ends with the sad note that "hearing this, one loses control." This ending opens up several possibilities of interpretation. But the Kochi version of this song, which is found in seven notebooks, ends in a romantic Jewish dream. At the end, they are in a high place. It's a splendid green mansion. There is an umbrella of fine stones where the birds come together. The thematic reversals found in the Kochi and Parur versions illustrate the folklore process. Folklore is not stagnant. It changes with the times and the needs. Folk communities, in fact, domesticate narratives for the performance of identity. The folklore process has to be interpreted by contextualizing the changes in the social process. Jews in Kochi and Parur, living

in different socioeconomic conditions and different political units, develop the same folk memory as different narratives to express their similar but distinct identities. Both groups imagined themselves as birds moving from one place to another. Both groups have memories of the hunter, but the meaning of the journey and the present life are defined in terms of their life worlds. They do not share the same universe.

Jews in Kochi as privileged citizens of the land saw themselves as well settled in a "splendid green mansion." The enterprising families of Kochi developed foreign trade and internal commerce during the colonial period. They could easily relate to the colonial authorities and local rulers. Those who were not in business could work in the establishments of their co-religionists. This created a sense of well being in the Jewish communities of Kochi. The situation in Parur was different. They had a longer story to narrate. It started with dispersion in distant past and marked subsequent levels of migration with a variety of contexts. In spite of their privileged positions and good relations with other communities, the deeper sense of the sojourn disturbs them. The mood of the sojourners troubled with complex memory makes the Parur version distinct. This type of folklore analysis focusing on identity performance is very relevant. But this type of interpretation has to be validated by the local knowledge of the folk.

#### **Local Knowledge**

Ruby Daniel has a few pertinent remarks about the Kochi version of this song:

One (song) is sung by the women of Kadavumbhavam synagogue in Cochin, who sing it as they clap their hands and dance in a circle. It tells the story of a bird who flew away to escape the hunter and it is said that the bird refers to Jews who fled from Palur to some place of safety. This song does not appear in the books of white Jews. (1995: 124)

Ruby, who lived in Kochi as a member of the Paradesi community and who had a very sensitive mind, makes sharp distinctions based on the pragmatics of the song. Pragmatics deals with the use of a song. Here she makes distinctions between the communities on the basis of the use of this parrot song. White Jews, the prominent section of the Paradesi community, do not include this origin song in their notebooks. We may naturally presume that the white Jews do not share the imagination of past embodied in this song. However, as evidenced by five notebooks collected from the Paradesi community containing these songs, the nonwhite Jews of the Paradesi community share this dream of the origin of the community in Kerala. The repertoire of the Paradesi community includes parallel



narratives about the origin and development of the community. They refer to Joseph Raban, the leader of the Jewish community, his arrival in Kodungallur, and the royal privileges granted to Jews through the copper plate grants. These parallel narratives of Paradesi community emphasize trade rights, social privileges, and business interaction. In general, these Paradesi narratives express the urban business-oriented subjectivity of the folk.

Another sharp distinction of the folk is made on the basis of the performance of the song. As Ruby reports, women of Kadavumbagam (Kochi) community would sing this song, "as they clap their hands and dance in a circle." Here the song is used for the delimitation of ethnic *we*. That ethnic *we* and *they* are formed through different discursive practices. Those who dance/those who do not dance, those who sing/those who do not sing, those who clap/those who do not clap are categories that determine *we* and *they*. One has to be very careful not to jump into the instinctive conclusion that this is a racial distinction. It is interesting that one of the beautiful recorded versions of this song now available in Jewish music archives is sung by Sarah Cohen, a white Jew now living in Kochi. This shows the networking of different groups within the larger Jewish community. Those who do not consider it to be their song still have no objection to singing it. And those who do not dance have no objection to watching it. This type of networking with well-defined internal borders is a characteristic feature of hyphenated society. Here, hyphenation expresses itself in social structures as cultural pluralism.

### Genre and Performance

In folklore, modern literary historiography, and communication studies, genre analysis is very important. Any native scholar will identify the above-mentioned song as Kaikottikkalippattu / Kummi / VattakKali. This is the generic division based on performance. These are clapping songs popular in Kerala. The Ayyayya element marks it as clapping song. But clapping songs have ethnic specificities. Different castes, such as Namboothiris, Nairs, Ezhavas, and Pulayas, have different clapping songs. Different religious groups, such as Christians and Muslims, also have specific varieties of clapping songs. They are generally performed by women. But Christians, Muslims, and Jews have some reservations about women dancing in public.

The fictive ethnicity (i.e. ethnic solidarity based upon an imagined relationship with members of the same nation/area) of modern Kerala or any region of the state is propelled by secularism, multiculturalism, and democracy, with elements such as Kaikkottikalipattu as hyphens in the foreground of Kerala's traditional society. So Christians and Muslims who are now well settled in Kerala celebrate these hyphens as markers of multiculturalism. The transnational communities of Christians, Muslims, and Jews may have different signification for this performance by women. The Kerala Jews who now live in Israel also may



have different perceptions about this performance.

The narrative model of the bird's song, especially its Kochi version, may be assigned to a Malayalam literary genre called Kilippattu. The religious epics of Malayalam, such as Mahabharata and Ramayana, are part of this Kilippattu genre. In this genre, a bird — in many cases a parrot — is invited as a medium to sing a poem. As we see in the Kochi version, the poem begins with the verses addressed to the parrot, which is persuaded to recite the rest of the poem. In longer poems such as Mahabharata and Ramayana, the dialogue with the parrot marks boundaries of different sections of the poem. The bird song of the Jews, through its generic classification as Killipattu, gets associated with the religious epic mode in Malayalam. But the linguistic substance of the song comes from the everyday speech of the people. This is justified by its association with Kaikottikalippattu, a typical folk dance. The Parur version of the bird's song is noteworthy for its narrative techniques. The design of the poem puts the bird in the foreground as the master signifier. Expressions such as "a forest flowing with milk" make the song foreign. But, at the same time, the parrot keeps the song within the domain of everyday life. JMFS always maintain this polarity between Jewishness and Malayalamness. The Parur version can be read in relation to Jewish or Kerala folklore. Such folklore and oral history can enrich the understanding of JMFS. As Ruby Daniel testifies, the Kerala Jews have a rich repertoire of folktales. Many of them represent the hyphenated society and folk religion of Kerala. Students of Jewish studies and Kerala studies can collaborate in collecting this data from Kerala Jews living in Israel and in Kerala.

### Tamil Poetics

Let me very briefly mention another channel of enquiry. Birds in the parrot songs are moving across lands, forests, and seashore. The journey of birds punctuated by terrain and ecosystem reminds us of the poetic conventions of classical Tamil Sangam poetry. The poetics of JMFS can be better understood in terms of Tamil poetics as found in the treatise *Tholkappyaum*. This type of poetry is characterized by lyricism combined with vivid references to human geography. References to historical places, personalities, and oral-literacy polarity are characteristics shared by JMFS and Sangam Tamil poetry.

### Synagogue Songs

Synagogue songs form a special category in JMFS. In general, they describe the construction of different synagogues in Kerala. As we can see from oral traditions, archeological monuments, remembered practices, and suggestive references in the songs, the synagogue community was the basic unit of Kerala Jewish consciousness. Labels and categories, such as Kochi Jews, Kerala Jews, Malabar Jews, Black Jews, and White Jews, are imposed from

outside. Jews of Kerala designate themselves as Jews of Parur, Mala, Chennamangalam, Thekkumbagam, Kadavumbagam, or of Paradesi palli. JMFS include songs about most of the synagogues. Certain synagogues have more than one song. In all these songs, by their very nature as literature, there is the fine blend of fact and imagination. The structure, design, and semantics of these songs support the suggestion that they were sung to express the individual identity of each synagogue and its community within the larger network of the Kerala Jewish community and Kerala society.

### **Religious *Other***

Most of the synagogue songs have the design of a prayer song. They begin and end with expressions of a Jewish desire to have a place of prayer. Very often formulaic blessings mark the closure. Generally, the songs have a section where the people make the demand that they should have a synagogue. The local ruler is a major figure in some of the songs. The Jews are invited to stay in his country. Why? Here is the vivid explanation in the Mala synagogue song:

The Kodungallur ruler said:

"All the different peoples are in my country except for the Jews.

So ten of you should remain."

"If ten of us remain here, first we must be helped with a synagogue."

"Go and choose a place you like."

The conversationalization of the narration without the explicit mention of the speakers indicates the oral transmission. Such gaps are common in folksongs and they are filled up with non-segmental phonemes like tune, pitch, and body language. The performative nature of the song is evident. Another possibility for facilitating the flow of information is the generic communication. The genre of synagogue songs maintains information flow through '*commonsense*.' The demand of the Jews and the reaction of the local ruler are predictable in this genre. Jews insist on maintaining their religious identity. The local community represented by the local ruler accepts it as a privilege to have a religious *other* in the country. This commonsense, as represented by folklore, is part of local knowledge. As a region, Kerala has a rich tradition of multi religious life. Christianity and Islam in Kerala trace their beginnings in this part of the world from the period of their origin. The folklore of Muslims and Christians has parallel references expressing the same *commonsense*. The church songs of Thomas Christians have similar structure and themes. Each church song invokes memories of the donations of local rulers. This memory also is maintained through several folk practices. So each locality has folk stories and folk customs that reinforce this memory. In many cases, in spite of disciplinary institutions of Semitic religions, folk prac-