

"TILL THE WOMEN FINISH SINGING:" HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF COCHIN JEWISH WOMEN'S MALAYALAM SONGS¹

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Dedicated to the memory of Shirley Berry Isenberg¹

Probably since before their ancestors left their ancient Indian home in Cranganore in the sixteenth century, Keralan Jewish women have been performing songs in Malayalam—songs for weddings and other life-cycle events, biblical narratives, devotional hymns, and songs about the history and legends of their community. Song expert and translator Ruby Daniel, who was born in Cochin in 1912, described the central importance of this music in traditional Cochin Jewish life:

The Cochin Jews have many songs in the Malayalam language, which were sung only by women, especially at parties...On some occasions the parties were held just for women, especially during the wedding celebrations. For other parties the men and women would all sit at the table...The men knew the Malayalam songs by hearing them, but the women are the ones who sing them...Till the women finish singing, no one will get up from the table.²

To a large extent, the Cochin Jewish women of today have finished singing these songs. Now that almost all the community has migrated to Israel, their use and knowledge of Malayalam is quickly being lost. Though they enthusiastically preserve and pass on traditional Cochin Hebrew songs to their children and grandchildren, they are no longer teaching Malayalam songs to the younger generations.³ The performance of these songs is now confined to an ever-decreasing number of older women who occasionally sing in Malayalam for public ethnic performances, for scholarly documentation, or privately for their own enjoyment. Fortunately a long-term project to collect the songs from Cochin Jewish women in Israel and Kerala has led to the preservation of about 260 song texts (photocopied from 27 hand-written notebooks) and the tape-recording of more than 60 songs (performed by 40 women in many different recordings between 1972 and 2000).⁴ The popularity of certain songs is evidenced by their appearance in many different notebooks and their continued performance by a number of different women, but some songs which are no longer part of the live repertoire are nevertheless of great literary and cultural interest.

Throughout the centuries, these poetic musical compositions by Cochin Jews escaped the notice of Jews from other lands, and also of their Hindu, Christian and Muslim neighbors. However, scholarly efforts are now under way to bring them to public attention in Israel and in Kerala. This article presents an overview of Malayalam Jewish women's songs, focusing on the language and textual contents of

¹ See her obituary, p. 133.

the songs, their traditional performance and transmission from generation to generation, and a history of efforts toward their publication, translation and analysis.

Language and Dating of the Songs

Today, more than 30 million people in and from the state of Kerala speak Malayalam, a Dravidian language closely related to Tamil with many Sanskrit elements. Its highly sophisticated written literature dates back to the tenth and eleventh centuries, by which time the Jews were firmly established residents of the southwest coast of India.⁵ As expressed by Kerala linguist Scaria Zacharia, Jews were undoubtedly among the first Keralites to speak Malayalam when it emerged as a language distinct from Tamil in the eighth century.⁶

Malayalam contains many different dialects, arising from Kerala's regional, ethnic, caste and religious diversity. (With a Hindu majority of 60%, Kerala's population is 20% Muslim and 20% Christian, reflecting the significant impact of immigrant traders from the west.) Though the Jews made up just a tiny fraction of the population—about 2500 before their mass departure for Israel during the past 50 years—they had their own way of speaking the language. Their "Jewish Malayalam," which contains some Hebrew and Ladino vocabulary and has some peculiarities of pronunciation and word construction, has only recently been subject to Zacharia's preliminary linguistic definition and analysis.⁷ While many of the songs to be discussed in this article would be comprehensible to Hindu, Muslim or Christian Keralites, others are difficult for non-Jews to understand, because of particular linguistic features and vocabulary, as well as references to generally unfamiliar Jewish customs and concepts.

In fact, quite a few of the songs are less than fully comprehensible even to the Jewish women who still sing them. For example, one of the most widely performed songs is "Vazhuvanna" (II-11), a song of blessing for which variant forms are found in 18 different notebooks. It is sung as a prelude to other blessing songs for weddings and circumcisions, but women singing it today report that they do not understand most of the lyrics. Such textual obscurity can be attributed partially to the process of combined oral and written transmission, in which puzzling variants and spelling errors have entered many of the texts. In addition, the oldest of the songs contains archaic words and grammatical forms.

How old are the songs? The easiest ones to date are Zionist songs composed about 50 years ago in Kerala, during a period of patriotic enthusiasm just after the founding of the State of Israel and before the majority of the community made *aliyah*. The lyrics of these are in straightforward modern Malayalam, and the melodies of some were borrowed from cinema songs popular at the time. A few other songs can be dated by their association with known individuals, either their composers or persons referred to in the texts (e.g. a Meir ben Avraham mentioned in a *brit mila* song which contains the date 1691).

It is much harder to assign even an approximate date to most of the songs, especially those found in multiple variants. However, a combination of content and linguistic analysis leads to the suggestion that at least a few have been passed down since the sixteenth century or even earlier. For example, the "Kadavumbagam Synagogue Song" from Cochin (I-15) contains internal evidence that it may have

been composed at the time of that synagogue's construction, 1539-44. Though Zacharia is reluctant to estimate the date of any particular song, he agrees that the language of this one would be compatible with such a dating, and he also notes that a song about the building of a synagogue in Cranganore (I-3) seems to be even older.⁸

The Song Notebooks

The song notebooks themselves are valuable artifacts for study, offering information in the form of occasional names and dates, and some useful data for speculation about transmission and song-sharing (and by extension other social interaction) among the different Jewish communities of Kerala. Ruby Daniel describes the nature and traditional function of the notebooks:

[In Cochin] Every woman had her own book of songs, which she copied, or maybe someone copied it for her, usually in a composition notebook. Young women go to the elderly people who know the songs, and they sing with them and learn. So if they are going to parties, they carry their [note]books with them.⁹

Most of the manuscripts copied for this collection are in the form of notebooks with paper covers, though some have cardboard covers and one is bound in leather. The shortest (S8 with 23 small pages) contains just eight songs and the longest (B3 with almost 200 large pages) has 150 songs. Some notebooks begin with a table of contents, and in many of them at least some songs are headed by a Malayalam title identifying the subject matter or the occasion on which the song should be sung. A few notebooks also include song headings in Hebrew, and some contain Hebrew songs, prayers or popular non-Jewish songs in addition to the Malayalam texts. One includes recipes and knitting instructions in a mixture of Malayalam and English.

The notebooks yield almost no information about composers, leaving for ethnographic research and speculation the important question of who wrote the texts and melodies of the songs. Notebook S13 contains the names of a number of women and men scattered throughout the text, but it is not clear whether they were composers, people from whom the songs were collected or, perhaps, scribes. Only one song author is clearly identified in writing, in Hebrew headings in one notebook (B3). Ruby Daniel has identified several devotional songs, which are late nineteenth century or early twentieth century poetic translations from Hebrew songs, composed by her two grandfathers. Composers of some of the more recent Zionist songs mentioned above have also been identified in interviews; all of these were men, but women sometimes set their lyrics to music.¹⁰

We cannot determine exactly when the Malayalam women's songs were first written down, though notebook S9, which seems to be the oldest in the collection, is probably more than 150 years old. It is in the handwriting of Ruby Daniel's great great aunt, who was also noted for her expertise in the songs.¹¹ One notebook (S13) is dated 1876 on its frontispiece,¹² and another (B3) may be even older, judging by a comment made about it in 1926.¹³ It is quite possible that earlier Jewish women, like Syrian Christian women in Kerala, preserved their song texts by inscribing them on dried palm leaves, as was the common practice for written records

and literary compositions in South India before the widespread availability of paper.¹⁴

Though men or boys with particularly good handwriting copied a few notebooks, more are identified as written by women, and it seems likely that most were copied by their original owners. The most recent notebooks were copied by Cochini women in Israel, either from notebooks they borrowed from relatives or friends or from older notebooks of their own.

Cross-indexing of the notebooks demonstrates considerable overlap in the repertoire of various individual singers and of the different Jewish communities of Kerala. These eight communities, each with its own synagogue, were located within an approximately 25 mile radius of each other, three on one street in the city of Cochin itself, two in the city of Ernakulam across the harbor, and one each in the inland villages of Parur, Chennamangalam and Mala. The collection contains notebooks from six of the eight communities, lacking only manuscripts from Mala and Kadavumbagam-Ernakulam. Apparently songs and notebooks would travel from community to community as brides moved into the homes and congregations of their husbands, following the traditional marriage pattern among seven of the communities.¹⁵ Songs were also shared at ritual and festive events to which members of all eight communities were invited. A high percentage of shared songs are found in the notebooks of women from the Paradesi and Kadavumbagam communities in Cochin—neighboring groups that did not intermarry but which did attend each other's ritual occasions. However it is interesting to note some patterns of exclusivity, with certain songs found only in the notebooks of particular communities.

The Song Texts

The texts of approximately 260 Malayalam Jewish songs, which vary greatly in style and period of composition, have been indexed for this project according to literary content and, to a limited extent, according to the occasions on which they were sung. The index categories, originally formulated by P.M. Jussay in the 1970s and used up to now by Johnson, are problematic in that they are text-based, reflecting the assumptions of researchers but not necessarily those of the women performing the songs.¹⁶ Further ethnographic research may lead to re-indexing with more attention to performance context and possibly to other genres identified by the singers themselves.

Wedding Songs

Sixty-five of the songs are associated with weddings and other life-cycle events. Some of these are identified (by headings in the text) with particular events in the elaborate Jewish wedding rituals of Kerala, such as the various parties held during the wedding week, the making of the ring, the tying of the *tali* (the traditional Kerala marriage necklace), the bride's emerging from the *mikveh*, the boiling of raisin wine for the wedding blessings and the procession of the bridegroom to the synagogue. Some feature references to the semi-legendary figure of Joseph Rabban, an ancestral leader of the Kerala Jews.¹⁷ Others contain advice to the bride or the groom—or in a few cases to the parents of a boy at his *brit mila*—about how to lead a good Jewish life. Some of the most popular songs are those praising the beauty of the bride:

Adorned with gold, you songbird,

Shining with diamonds,
Camphor and rosewater mixed,
All kinds of good-smelling things.
In green silk she is robed,
The woman blessed by God is she.¹⁸
Or the charming bridegroom:
Wearing a fine head-dress and red *kunkum* powder,
The bridegroom is coming through the street.
He seems to radiate chivalry as well as shyness.
Though he is still at the far end of the street,
He has appeared at the turning, within my sight.
Moving this way and that way,
This youth comes through the street.¹⁹

Only a few of the wedding songs are even slightly sexually suggestive, in contrast to vernacular wedding songs in many traditional Jewish communities and non-Jewish groups in India. Also missing from the Cochin Jewish weddings songs are laments for the bride leaving her family home, warnings about the perils of marriage, or songs teasing the bride and groom. Further ethnographic research may reveal that non-Jewish popular or folk songs in Malayalam filled some of these functions, but none are included in the Jewish women's song notebooks.

Historical Songs

About 40 of the collected song texts—the smallest number but in some ways the most intriguing—have been categorized as "historical." These include songs narrating various origin legends of the Kerala Jews, such as the song "In Famous Vanchi" describing the royal procession of Chirianandan (another name for the Jewish leader Joseph Rabban), who received from the Hindu ruler a copper plate engraved with privileges for his people:

In the world-famous city of Vanchi there arose one
Who had the Lord's grace bestowed upon him.
With chieftain's title, day lamp,
And cloth spread upon the way,
Both above the head and under the feet, in an unbroken stretch.
The rich city was filled (with people)
When the king (installed) him the chieftain,
Sprinkling three thousand and six hundred measures of rice.
While rice was being sprinkled, the king among them sat,
And with scribbling noises wrote artistically on copper plates.
And now to describe the procession of Chirianandan—
it is well beyond words!
Lo! There comes the royal Chirianandan riding on elephant's back!
Lo! There comes the virtuous Chirianandan riding on horse's back!
Under the green banner he comes,
By sweet maidens he is welcomed,
And into the synagogue conducted...
A green garland thick he wears,

Over the garb a many-folded robe of green silk he has donned.
 He who earned the ruler's seal,
 Let him reign glorious over his small state,
 Acknowledging the obeisance of his loyal subjects.²⁰

Synagogue (*palli*) songs give descriptive details about the building of particular synagogues in Kerala, like the Kadavumbagam Synagogue mentioned above, and legendary accounts of the origins of other synagogues, such as the one in Mala.²¹ These can be compared with the genre of Malayalam *palli* songs commemorating the construction of certain Syrian Christian churches.²²

Other "wedding" and "historical" songs can also be analyzed usefully in relation to comparable non-Jewish Malayalam songs. P.M. Jussay began this project with his comparison of a few Jewish songs with songs of the Knanaya sect of Syrian Christians in Kerala. Israeli anthropologist Shalva Weil, followed by Richard Swiderski, have used Jussay's preliminary comparisons in discussing cultural similarities between the Cochin Jews and the Knanaya Christians, who maintain that they have a "pure" Jewish ancestry.²³

Uniquely Jewish creations are found in the Zionist lyrics, also included in the "historical" category. One of several from the early twentieth century is the popular "Kakicha's Song:"

The hope we have had since ancient times
 To return to the land
 Given to us by the One God
 Has not faded.
 Brethren of the Diaspora,
 Listen to the song of our future.
 As long as Jews are alive
 Our hope will endure.
 The House of Jacob will again reside there,
 Through the sacred love of God.
 By the grace of the Almighty God
 The *Raja Mashiah* will rule over her.²⁴

Among the songs composed just before and after the creation of the State of Israel is this one from the village of Parur:

It's dawning, it's dawning,
 The freedom we longed for and prayed for so long.
 The independence came
 With its golden beauty spreading.
 The independence that Jerusalem gained
 Is not a symbol.
 Eretz Israel, Eretz Israel,
 Sing to its independence.
 One flag is rising up.
 The chains are breaking and falling from our legs.
 It's dawning, it's dawning,
 The freedom we longed for and prayed for so long.²⁵

Biblical Songs

Approximately a third of the songs collected are biblical narratives, some with a decided Indian flavor. For example the term *puja* is used for religious offerings made by Cain and Abel (III-61) and by Abraham's parents (III-63). In one song that relates the Purim story (III-11), a decree is written on palm leaves (*ola*) and sent out across the land. When the Torah is given on Mt. Sinai, the sound of the Jewish *shofar* or ram's horn is joined by musical instruments typical of south India:

Then the Everlasting God made His royal appearance.²⁶
The sky and the earth all trembled,
And there were thunder and lightning
And the sound of the *shofar*.
All kinds of musical instruments were there:
Aragam, trumpet, violin, and *veena*.²⁷

Identifying *midrashic* sources and recurring themes in these narrative songs, which present convincing evidence of Cochin Jewish women's acquaintance with Talmudic as well as Biblical texts, will be a major project. The image of women in the Biblical songs is another topic for further research. Female characters include the Queen of Sheba, Serah bat Asher, Pharaoh's daughter, Haman's wife and daughter, and Goliath's mother as well as the more familiar Biblical figures of the matriarchs, Deborah, Esther, Naomi and Ruth. Though stories about all these women are found in *midrash*, the proportion of Cochin songs mentioning them seems strikingly large, and the women are generally presented as positive or at least decidedly interesting characters.

Devotional Songs

Most of the remaining songs are devotional hymns, both original compositions and translations from the Hebrew. Comparing these hymns to the Hebrew *piyyutim*, that are performed by Cochin Jewish women as well as men, will be particularly interesting.²⁸ Given the women's intimate knowledge of both genres, it is not surprising that Hebrew and Malayalam songs share a number of popular tunes.

Performance of the Songs

As described here by Ruby Daniel, the Malayalam songs traditionally were sung by Jewish women in Kerala during their week-long wedding celebrations, some during parties for women alone and some at gatherings for women and men together. In addition to parties, the songs were performed in street processions for both the bride and the groom. In Jewtown Cochin, the week of Hanukkah was also a special time for singing Malayalam songs, at women's parties that were held each night of the holiday:

Every night during Hanukkah a few people would join together and have a party in one house or another in the Town, a different house every night. People shared the expenses and made some snacks...This was the time the ladies would sing and dance around in a circle clapping their hands and keeping time with their feet. The ladies and girls from Kadavumbagam Synagogue particularly

enjoyed these songs and dances, and we liked to join in their parties...all the ladies and girls bringing their songbooks.²⁹

Women from Kadavumbagam-Cochin performed the circle dance with clapping, which Daniel refers to in this description, on videotape in a re-enactment at Moshav Taoz in 1981.³⁰ Four older women sat in the center of the circle singing from notebooks, while others performed a slow and rhythmic dance around them, sometimes joining in the songs. Such occasions were associated with the type of song labeled in the notebooks as *kalipattu* or "play song" (e.g. songs I-7, IV-19), probably patterned after the *kaikottikali* dance performed during particular festivals by Hindu women in Kerala: "[*Kaikottikali*] participants, all women or young girls, form a circle, generally around a lighted pedestal lamp, which is placed on a stool, and sing songs and clap their hands, and do simple movements coupled with a stamp of the feet."³¹ Syrian Christian women also used to dance in a circle around a lighted lamp as part of their marriage celebrations, though the custom is no longer practiced; and Mappila Muslims in Kerala traditionally performed "*oppana*" wedding songs while standing in a circle around the bride.³² Some women from Kerala Jewish communities outside of Cochin have said that they did not have the custom of Hanukkah parties with songs and dances, and a few Paradesi women in Cochin told me that they simply watched the dances rather than participating, perhaps because they associated them with non-Jewish customs.

The Jewish women also performed songs at the dedication of a new Sefer Torah, which was customarily kept overnight in the home of the family donating it to the synagogue. Members of the household and their relatives and friends would stay awake all night—praying, feasting and singing songs in both Hebrew and Malayalam—to show respect to the Sefer Torah as an honored guest in their home. The following morning, the new scroll would be carried to the synagogue by the whole community in a procession, with the singing of Malayalam and Hebrew songs and the clapping of hands. In at least two communities, Tekkumbagam in Ernakulam and Paradesi in Cochin, the procession would circumambulate the outside of synagogue on this occasion, as on Simhat Torah.³³ This is one of the songs associated with such an occasion:

The Torah given from Mount Sinai,
 The Torah obtained on a diamond platter,
 It was shown to all the tribes;
 The noble nation accepted it.
 With dancing and singing they took the Torah.
 Then there was happiness in their hearts.
 May the Torah of Moshe prosper as a treasure.
 It is there in our presence as the crowning glory.
 Very soon it reached the great and beautiful Synagogue,³⁴
 The beautiful Sefer Torah
 Kept with joy.
 Fifty-four sections,
 All the sections were given to us.

In the ark with four legs
The Torah was installed.³⁵

Publication and Translation

It is unfortunate, though perhaps not surprising, that the Malayalam Jewish songs have remained unknown for so long outside the Cochin Jewish community. A brief historical overview of efforts to make them available to outsiders shows little concerted activity until the 1970s.³⁶ Until that time, most non-Indians writing about the Cochin Jews were Jewish men, who knew Hebrew and were interested in Jewish elements of Cochin life, which they could situate within the comparative study of Jewish history and culture throughout the world. In the 1960s, ethnomusicologist Johanna Spector and her student, Israel Ross, pioneered the study of Hebrew music in Kerala, but like other scholars before them, they concentrated most of their attention on the synagogue rather than the home, and on male rather than female activities.³⁷

Most importantly, none of the early Jewish visitors to Kerala who wrote about its Jewish culture had any knowledge of Malayalam. For example, the noted Ashkenazi Rabbi Jacob Saphir, who visited Cochin in the 1860s, did not mention the songs at all and, in fact, revealed utter ignorance about the very sophisticated and complex language in which they were written:

Among themselves the Jews speak in the language of the gentiles of the Land: Malabarit...This language is harder to learn than all the others I have heard before. There is not even much language spoken, because the lips and tongue do not meet in pronunciation, only sounds are uttered and simple noises, like the growls of animals... Also the language has no grammar.³⁸

Even in describing Kerala Jewish weddings, the only early writer to mention the songs was the nineteenth century Ashkenazi traveler Shlomo Reinman, who settled down in Cochin for some time and married into the Paradesi community's Hallegua family. His detailed account of a Cochin wedding briefly notes: "And the women sing songs in the language of Malabar."³⁹ In a 1981 text-based study of Cochin Jewish wedding customs through examination of Hebrew wedding songs and liturgy from Cochin, Mishael Caspi writes:

The women of the community are even given special time to sing, after the bridegroom gives the bride the *ketuba*. It is unfortunate that we do not have even one text which introduces us to the women's songs, but it is possible that these were sung in the native language.⁴⁰

Non-Jewish Indian scholars of Malayalam literature and Keralan culture also have lacked access to the songs, missing the opportunity to learn about them because they were not published—in contrast, for example, to the songs of the Syrian Christians. The only non-Jewish Keralite known to have taken a serious interest in the Jewish songs before the 1970s was the Christian historian T.K. Joseph, who in the mid-1920s borrowed two song notebooks from the Paradesi Jews of Cochin and also discussed the songs with a Jew in Parur. In reading the Joseph Rabban song quoted

above (I-10), he interpreted the number 3600 (referring to the measures of rice scattered at a wedding) as a "chronogram" referring to the date of the famous Jewish copper plates—a theory which he proposed in a subsequent newspaper article, which included the Malayalam text of a few verses of the song but did not mention that the songs were performed by Jewish women.⁴¹ He also wrote a letter to a prominent Paradesi Jewish man expressing his conviction that the Malayalam songs were historically important and urging that they be published. "I am ready to prepare the manuscript for the press gratis," he offered, requesting to borrow the notebooks again for this purpose.⁴² Apparently nothing came of his proposal. The next reference I have found to T.K. Joseph's interest in the songs came 20 years later, when A.I. Simon devoted three paragraphs of his pamphlet *The Songs of the Jews of Cochin* to denouncing Joseph's "chronogram" theory, without mentioning him by name.⁴³

Dr. A.I. Simon, a member of the Paradesi community in Cochin, developed a strong interest in the history and traditions of his community after retiring from medical service in Burma. His 1947 pamphlet included the Malayalam text (without translation) of five complete songs and fragments of ten others, with Malayalam footnotes suggesting interpretations of some difficult words. Though some of his English commentary is problematic due to the absence of credit to the women who performed and transmitted the songs and to his commentary's bias against the non-Paradesi Jews of Kerala, this publication was crucially important in bringing the songs to the attention of future researchers, who would take up the challenge of translation and analysis.

The first few English translations of Malayalam Jewish songs were made in the 1970s by the late Jacob E. Cohen, the only Cochin Jewish man in recent times who had both a university-level knowledge of Malayalam and an avid interest in the songs. He and his wife Sarah (an expert singer) were important resources for me in 1974 and 1977, when I began my early work on the songs, and he prepared several translations for my MA thesis.⁴⁴

At about the same time, the late Shirley Isenberg, an Israeli anthropologist, was beginning her efforts to photocopy song notebooks and to tape record Malayalam Jewish songs from Cochini women in Israel. When I received a grant to do the same thing in Kerala, we began corresponding with each other and decided to make it a joint project. She was the one who established an early connection with the Jewish Music Research Center at Hebrew University in Jerusalem and began the process of depositing our recordings in the National Sound Archives. She also put me in touch with Professor P.M. Jussay, whom I met during my 1977 trip to India.

A Keralan Christian scholar and journalist, Jussay had begun collecting songs and discussing them with Jewish acquaintances in his home village of Chennamangalam and in nearby Parur; he later developed a close friendship with Jacob Cohen and others in Cochin, consulting frequently with the Cohens about his translations. He worked with Shirley Isenberg and myself from 1976 to 1981, mostly by mail, and also during a brief period in Israel, identifying and cross-indexing songs in all the notebooks that we were collecting and photocopying. The index framework which he established has been invaluable for processing recently photocopied notebooks. In his translations and analysis, Jussay concentrated on songs about early Jewish settlements in Kerala, addressing his scholarly papers in India mainly to

Kerala historians, though one of his articles was published in Hebrew translation.⁴⁵ In addition, he has been both helpful and influential in my own research and in the work of Weil, Swiderski, and Katz and Goldberg, and has published popular Malayalam articles about Israel and the Jews of Kerala.⁴⁶

The major translation effort was made by Ruby Daniel, now living in Kibbutz Neot Mordecai, in Israel, who brought to her work the invaluable perspective of a woman who has sung the songs since her childhood in early twentieth century Cochin. She learned them from her mother and grandmother, both acknowledged as expert singers by fellow members of the Paradesi community and by their neighbors from Kadavumbagam-Cochin. While translating, Ruby Daniel often referred to explanations and related stories which she remembered from her grandmother Rachel ("Docho") Japheth (1864-1944), who carried into her generation the knowledge of the songs and their meanings which was passed down from her own great aunt. In addition to this deep personal and family knowledge, Ruby Daniel could draw on her experience as the first Jewish woman in Kerala to go to secondary school and then college, where she was introduced to the study of classical Malayalam and developed her fluency in written English. Collaborating first with Isenberg and then for many years with me, she completed more than 120 English translations of the songs, 13 of them included in her book of memoirs.⁴⁷

As discussed above, the project of translating these Jewish songs is complicated by the particular nature of "Jewish Malayalam" and by numerous references to customs and stories, which are not known to Malayalam-speakers outside the Jewish community. This explains the importance of translations by insiders who are familiar with the songs and the culture of their community. However, the prevalence of archaic forms and linguistic transformations in many songs has rendered them unintelligible even to an educated insider like Ruby Daniel, the last member of the community who knows the songs well and has the requisite translation skills.

As noted, Professor Scaria Zacharia is now addressing the problem of textual obscurity in the Malayalam Jewish songs. In addition to his translation skills and expertise in sixteenth to eighteenth century Malayalam, Zacharia has the experience and interest to place the songs in the larger context of Kerala folk literature as a whole. After we began our collaboration in Kerala in 1999, the Ben-Zvi Research Institute in Jerusalem sponsored a period of our intensive work together during the summer of 2000 in Israel. There, Zacharia became acquainted with members of the Israeli Cochini community—an important step in immersing himself in the research. In addition to meeting with them informally and speaking at a large Cochini gathering in Moshav Nevatim, he also consulted with Israeli scholars and delivered an academic conference paper on "Jewish Malayalam." His preliminary work on the songs will soon be published in Malayalam, English and Hebrew, and we are working together on a book and compact disk for the Yuval Music Series of the Jewish Music Research Center.

Conclusion

As I hope this historical overview demonstrates, examination of the Malayalam Jewish song texts provides a fruitful beginning from which to raise issues of ethnographic, historical, literary and musical interpretation. This analysis must be

grounded in recognition and appreciation of interrelated cultural realms. In a recent article, I emphasized the realm of gender, noting the intertwined nature of Cochin Jewish female and male musical traditions.⁴⁸ Similar attention must be given to the encounter and complex relationship of Kerala culture and outside Jewish influences in the songs—for example, through comparative examination of their religious and historical themes, linguistic analysis of their Malayalam and Hebrew elements, and ethnomusicological study of their melodies and performance.

Undeniably, the Malayalam Jewish songs are in danger of being forgotten as part of a live performance repertoire. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, when folklorist Marcia Walerstein did her research in Cochini *moshavim*, she found that a few vernacular songs were still being sung at some weddings and *brit milas*, but only by the older women:

If there is a *Shabbat ha-kallah*, the old women may continue to sing songs from their notebooks or by heart, but there is a definite switch towards the Hebrew Cochini songs...In a four-hour session I observed, only the older women sang a few songs in Malayalam, and the younger women in another room performed many popular Israeli songs.⁴⁹

Now two decades later, the songs have become "museum pieces," most likely to be performed at such public events as the 1995 opening of an exhibition on Indian Jewry at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem or the Moshav Nevatim gathering addressed by Zacharia in 2000. However, although melodies for the majority of the songs have been forgotten even by the oldest generation of women, the literary, historical and cultural value of their lyrics can be preserved for future generations of the community, as well as for scholarly study, through the ongoing project of publishing and translating them.

NOTES

¹ This paper is based on material collected and translated in collaborative work with Ruby Daniel and the late Shirley Isenberg in Israel and with P.M. Jussay and Scaria Zacharia in Kerala; my appreciation for their efforts and encouragement cannot be measured. I am grateful for the following grants in support of my ongoing research on the Malayalam Jewish songs: Ithaca College Summer Research Grant 2000; Fulbright Senior Research Fellowship 1998-99; American Philosophical Society Research Grants 1996-97, 1994-95; Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture Fellowships 1996-97, 1994-95; Oberlin Graduate Fellowship 1977.

² Ruby Daniel and Barbara C. Johnson, *Ruby of Cochin: An Indian Jewish Woman Remembers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995), pp. 174-5.

³ Barbara C. Johnson, "Recent Developments in the Exploration and Expression of Cochin Jewish Identity," Conference on Identity and Memory, Yad Ben-Zvi, Jerusalem, May 2000. See Edwin Seroussi, "The Singing of the Sephardi Piyyut in Cochin (India)," in *Piyyut in Tradition Series 2* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University

Press). Hebrew. For a discussion of women's contemporary participation in the performance and transmission of Cochin Hebrew songs in Israel.

⁴ Shirley Isenberg, Barbara Johnson, and P.M. Jussay initiated photocopying of the notebooks in a joint project. Scholars hope that more songs will be discovered in notebooks still to be collected; a complete set of photocopies will be deposited in the archives of the Cochin Jewish Heritage Center in Moshav Nevatim, Israel. Audio recordings are available in the National Sound Archives at the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem, and are being studied in cooperation with the Jewish Music Research Center at Hebrew University. An analysis of their melodies will be part of that project. The notebook and song numbers cited in this article refer to the comprehensive index of Malayalam Jewish songs, begun by P.M. Jussay and updated by Barbara Johnson, available in the National Sound Archives.

⁵ For historical perspectives in English on Malayalam language and literature see Krishna Chaitanya, *A History of Malayalam Literature* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1971); and K.M. George, *A Survey of Malayalam Literature* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1968).

⁶ Scaria Zacharia, “Is There a Jewish Malayalam?” paper delivered at the *Sixth International Congress of Misgav Yerushalayim* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, June 2000). Professor Zacharia, chair of the Malayalam Department at Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit in Kalady, Kerala, is now working intensively on translation and analysis of the Jewish songs. See below for further details.

⁷ Zacharia identifies a number of unique features of Jewish Malayalam, but at this stage of investigation he declines to identify it as a separate dialect. Zacharia, “Is There a Jewish Malayalam?” See, A.I. Simon, “Language a Clue to History,” in *Bulletin of the Rama Varma Research Institute* 10 (1) (1943), includes a list of words from Hebrew and other languages characteristic of the Malayalam spoken by Paradesi Jews in Cochin.

⁸ Zacharia, personal communication, July 2000. Both these songs are discussed in an article in progress by Orna Eliyahu-Oron and Johnson, analyzing information about Kerala synagogue architecture from the Malayalam Jewish songs. On the Jews in Cranganore, see Barbara C. Johnson (B.J. Hudson). *Shingli or Jewish Cranganore in the Traditions of the Cochin Jews of India, with an Appendix on the Cochin Jewish Chronicles* (MA Thesis, Smith College, 1975); Nathan Katz and Ellen S. Goldberg, *The Last Jews of Cochin: Jewish Identity in Hindu India* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1993); J.B. Segal, *A History of the Jews of Cochin* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1993); and most recently, Arthur M. Lesley, “Shingli in Cochin Jewish Memory and in Eyewitness Accounts,” in *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies*, Vol. 3 (April 2000), pp. 7-21.

⁹ Daniel and Johnson, *Ruby of Cochin*, p. 174.

¹⁰ The composer of three songs identified in notebook B3 was Moshe Sarfati (d. 1838), a scholar and the scribe of an early nineteenth century Paradesi record book. (See Sassoon Ms.# 1030, photocopy in Mahon Ben Zvi Library, Jerusalem.) Ruby Daniel's grandfathers were Daniel Haim and Eliyahu Japheth, both of Cochin. Japheth also composed an early Zionist song, as did Isaac Moshe Roby of Cochin; known composers of more recent Zionist songs were Eliyahu Meir and Sion

Varamukathu of Parur and Moshe Joseph Hai and Yaacov Itzhak of Ernakulam. Two twentieth century comic love songs are attributed to Isaac E. Hallegua of Cochin.

¹¹ See Daniel and Johnson, *Ruby of Cochin*, pp. xiii and 37 for discussion of notebook S9 and its copyist.

¹² This is the only leather-bound notebook, dated and identified on its title page as belonging to Abigail Madai, a member of the Tekkumbagam community in Cochin.

¹³ The appearance of the penciled initials "TKJ" inside anonymous notebook B3 (from the Paradesi community in Cochin) indicates that it is one of the two manuscripts "of old blue paper" which were examined in 1926 by the Kerala Christian scholar T.K. Joseph who stated, "In my opinion their age is not less than a hundred years." T.K. Joseph, "Letter to the Editor," *The Western Star*, 18 Dec. 1926, Collection of Samuel H. Hallegua, Cochin. The dating of S9 and S13 is more certain.

¹⁴ Richard M. Swiderski, *The Blood Weddings: The Knanaya Christians of Kerala* (Madras: New Era Publications, 1988), p. 38.

¹⁵ Members of the Cochin Paradesi congregation of "White Jews" descend primarily from more recent immigrants to India (sixteenth century and later) in contrast to the more ancient community of Malabari Jews in the other seven congregations. Paradesis and Malabaris did not intermarry, but were culturally similar in fundamental ways, including their knowledge of the Malayalam songs.

¹⁶ Simon (1947, p. 13), distinguished, also by literary content, between "historical songs," "biblical songs" and "hymns," relegating the non-historical wedding songs to a "miscellaneous" category.

¹⁷ On Joseph Rabban in Cochin Jewish folklore, see Johnson, *Shingli or Jewish Cranganore*; Johnson, "The Emperor's Welcome: Reconsideration of an Origin Theme in Cochin Jewish Folklore," in Thomas Timberg, ed., *Jews in India* (New Delhi, Vikas, 1986), pp. 161-176;

¹⁸ Song II-6, from translation by Ruby Daniel. Daniel and Johnson, *Ruby of Cochin*, p. 180.

¹⁹ Song II-7, from translation by Scaria Zacharia.

²⁰ Excerpts from Song I-10, translation by P.M. Jussay. Part of an earlier translation of this song appeared in Jussay, "The Malayalam Folk Songs of the Cochin Jews and the Light They Throw on Their History, Customs and Manners," paper presented at the 39th Session of the Indian History Congress (Hyderabad: Osmania University, 1978). Jacob E. Cohen's translations of the same song are found in Johnson, *Shingli or Jewish Cranganore*, pp. 125-6, and Katz and Goldberg, *The Last Jews of Cochin*, pp. 45-6.

²¹ As noted above, we have not yet located any notebooks from the village of Mala, but the Mala Synagogue Song is found in notebooks from Chennamangalam and Cochin, and was recorded by a woman from Ernakulam.

²² Chummar Choondal, *Christian Folk Songs* (Trichur: Kerala Folklore Academy, 1983), pp. 23, 52. For examples see P.U. Lukas, *Purathanappattukal (Ancient Songs of the Syrian Christians of Malabar)*, seventh ed. (first publ. 1910) (Kottayam, Kerala: Jyothi Book House). Malayalam.

²³ Jussay, "The Wedding Songs of the Cochin Jews and of the Knanite Christians of Kerala," Diocese of Kottayam, *Symposium on Knanites*, II, (Kottayam, 1986), pp. 1-7. Shalva Weil, "Symmetry between Christians and Jews in India: The Knanite Christians and the Cochin Jews of Kerala," in Thomas Timberg, ed., *Jews in India*, New York, 1986, pp. 177-204 (originally published in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 16:2, 1982). Swiderski, *Blood Weddings*, pp.40-3, 148.

²⁴ Excerpt from Song I-24 by Isaac Moshe Roby (nicknamed "Kakicha," d. 1955), translation by Ruby Daniel. Daniel and Johnson, *Ruby of Cochin*, p. 92.

²⁵ Song I-33, translation by Scaria Zacharia.

²⁶ *Ezhunalli* is a verb used when a king makes an appearance.

²⁷ The *aragam* has not been identified. Excerpt from Song III-26, translation by Ruby Daniel and Scaria Zacharia.

²⁸ Seroussi, "The Singing of the Sephardi *Piyyut*." For earlier studies see Johanna Spector, "Jewish Songs from Cochin, India, With Special Reference to Cantillation and Shingli Tunes," in *Proceedings of the Fifth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem, 1963), Vol. 4, pp. 245-265; and Israel Ross, *Cultural Stability and Change in a Minority Group: A Study of the Liturgical and Folk Songs of the Jews of Cochin* (PhD dissertation, Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, 1977).

²⁹ Daniel and Johnson, *Ruby of Cochin*, p. 40. Laurence D. Loeb, "Gender, Marriage, and Social Conflict in Habban," in Harvey Goldberg, ed., *Sephardi and Middle Eastern Jewries* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), see p. 272 for comments on Hanukkah as a women's holiday with special music and games in Habban, Yemen.

³⁰ See videotape #Y4477, National Sound Archives, Jerusalem.

³¹ Mohan Khokar, "Kerala," in Mulk Raj Anand, ed., *Classical and Folk Dances of India* (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1963), p. 38.

³² L.K. Anantha Krishna Ayyar, *Social Anthropology of the Syrian Christians* (Ernaukulam: Cochin Government Press, 1926), p. 317. Choondal, *Christian Folk Songs*, p. 39. A. Sreedhara Menon, *Social and Cultural History of Kerala* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1979), p. 145.

³³ Confirmed by Isaac Joshua, Ernaukulam, September 1999, and by many Paradesi Jews.

³⁴ In notebooks from the Paradesi community, this line reads "the Paradesi synagogue."

³⁵ Song I-19, translation by Ruby Daniel and Scaria Zacharia. Another song commonly performed during this procession was III-17.

³⁶ The songs were not even mentioned in Walter Fischel's article on "The Literary Creativity of the Jews of Cochin," in *Jewish Book Annual* 28 (New York: Jewish Book Council of America, 1970-71), pp. 25-31.

³⁷ See, note 28.

³⁸ Jacob Saphir, *Even Sapir*, II (Lyck, 1874), p. 86. Hebrew.

³⁹ Shlomo Reinman, *Masa'ot Shlomo (The Travels of Solomon)*, W. Schur, ed. (Vienna, 1884), p. 157. Hebrew.

⁴⁰ Mishael Marwari Caspi, "Wedding Customs of the Jews of Cochin According to the Book of Poems and the Songs of Praise," in Caspi, ed., *Jewish Tradition in the*

Diaspora: Studies in Memory of Walter J. Fischel (Berkeley: Judah Magnes Museum, 1981), p. 232.

⁴¹ T.K. Joseph, "Letter to the Editor: Bhaskara Ravi's Date," *The Western Star*, 18 Dec. 1926. Collection of Samuel H. Hallegua, Cochin. I have not located a prior letter or article on the topic which Joseph wrote for this newspaper, apparently earlier in the same month.

⁴² T.K. Joseph, to Isaac E. Hallegua, 15 Jan. 1927. Collection of Samuel H. Hallegua, Cochin.

⁴³ A.I. Simon, *The Songs of the Jews of Cochin and their Historical Significance* (pamphlet), Cochin, 1947, pp. 23-5. The material in this pamphlet first appeared as an article with the same title in *Bulletin of the Rama Varma Research Institute*, Vol. 13 (July 1946), pp. 25-38.

⁴⁴ See Barbara C. Johnson, "Jacob E. Cohen—In Memoriam (1913-1999), in *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies*, Vol. 3 (April 2000), pp. 144-5. Cohen's early translations appear in Johnson, *Shingli or Jewish Cranganore*, pp. 124-7, with later versions in Katz and Goldberg, *The Last Jews of Cochin*, pp. 45-8.

⁴⁵ Jussay, "The Malayalam Folk Songs," also "The Song of Evarayi," in Timberg, ed., *Jews in India*, pp. 145-160. The translation of this article in *Pe'amim: Studies in Oriental Jewry* 13 (1982), pp. 84-95, marked the first Hebrew-language publication of Malayalam Jewish songs. A number of his English translations remain unpublished.

⁴⁶ These articles have appeared in *The Kerala Times*, a Malayalam daily newspaper in Ernakulam, which Jussay edited for many years after his retirement from Calico Regional Engineering College, where he was Professor of English.

⁴⁷ See Daniel and Johnson, *Ruby of Cochin*, for Daniel's account of how she began the project. Nine of Daniel's translations, rendered into Hebrew by Miriam Dekel Squires, are found in Shirley Isenberg, Rivka Daniel and Miriam Dekel-Squires, *Tishah Shire-Am Yehudi'im ba-Malayalam (Nine Jewish Folksongs in Malayalam)* (Jerusalem, 1984). Hebrew and Malayalam. See, also Ruby Daniel, "More Memories of Cochin Jew Town," in *Bridges: A Journal for Jewish Feminists and Our Friends* 7 (1) (Winter 1997-98), pp. 39-43.

⁴⁸ Johnson, "'They Carry Their Notebooks with Them: Women's Vernacular Jewish Songs from Cochin, South India,'" in *Pe'amim: Studies in Oriental Jewry* 82 (Winter 2000), pp. 64-80. Hebrew.

⁴⁹ Marcia Walerstein (Sibony), *Public Rituals Among the Jews from Cochin, India, in Israel: Expressions of Ethnic Identity* (PhD dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1987), p. 118.