

Marggam Kali

Performance at Chavara Cultural Center



Mārggam Kaḷi

Mārggam Kaḷi (Malayalam, “Dance of the Way”), is a non-liturgical performing art of the St. Thomas Christians in Kerala, India. The song text celebrates the life, mission, and martyrdom of St. Thomas the Apostle in India. The proto-Dravidian-speaking converts to Christianity in Kerala chose a Pali/Sanskrit term, “Mārggam” (the way), to refer to the new religion that came to its shore from West Asia. There are two reasons for this linguistic connection. First, Kerala was a Buddhist country in the early Christian era. The region was replete with Buddhist Vihāra-s. The generic term that the Buddha used for his teaching was Mārg, meaning “way.” Therefore, the term was all too familiar to Keralites in the early Christian era. Conversion to any religion was referred to as mārggam kūṭal (“joining the way”).

When the Christians started celebrating the faith through song and dance, they called the art form “Mārggam Kaḷi.” In canto 9, line 8, the proclamation of the Apostle is referred to as proclaiming the Mārggam, equating Mārggam with the Gospel. What is more significant is that Mārggam Kaḷi is a celebration not of the life of Jesus Christ or the content of the faith, but the mission and martyrdom of the bearer of the message of Jesus, all the way from Palestine to South India.

According to E. R. Humbye, S. J., the song and dance of Mārggam Kaḷi might be a “Christian imitation of the yāthraKaḷi, i.e., the journey song of the Nambuthiris (Malabar Brahmins),” (quoted in Mundadan 1989:30).

P. U. Lukas and the song text: The first printed version of the song text of Mārggam Kaḷi that is available today is from a compilation of P. U. Lukas in his book, “Malayāḷathile Surīyānikṛistyānikaḷuṭe Purātanappāṭṭukaḷi” (“Ancient Songs of the Syriac Christians of Malabar,” Lukas: 1910). There is a total of 365 verses in the opening invocation, followed by 14 cantos.

The text that we find in P. U. Lukas is in modern Malayalam. The author followed strictly Malayalam prosody. The text went through several redactions. There are vestiges of Tamil phonemes, especially in the opening invocation, pushing the composition's date further into several centuries before the Malayalam era.

The composition of the song text happened at a time when Syriac words were part of the common parlance of Christians in Kerala. For example, throughout the song, the Apostle's name appears in its East-Syriac version: "Tōmā." Other Syriac words that appear often are: Māran ("our Lord"). Īšō ("Jesus"), slīhā ("apostle"), māmōdīsā ("baptism") Mār ("Holy"/ "saint"), ruha (literally, "breath;" the third person of the Holy Trinity). Some times, Syriac- word endings are inflected to make them sound similar to Malayalam syntax. For example, slīhan tōmā (Canto 12, verse 18). The Syriac word slīhā ("Apostle") does not take an "n" ending in adjectival form. Similarly, the Syriac word, māran ("our Lord") is inflected in the vocative case as mārānē (Canto 6, verse 17). Such usages indicate strong familiarity with Syriac words as well as their use outside the context of the liturgy.

The cadences at the end of cantos deserve special attention. Departing from the meaningful text, the singers add vocables, i. e., non-sense syllables that simulate the sound of rhythmic executions on percussive instruments. Examples of such vocables are thitha thimrita thei.

The vocables do not have a specific format. The lead singer instantly creates a combination of syllables that can fit into the structure and duration of a specified number of beats in the rhythm.

Marggam Kali and the Knanaya Christians: All the masters of Mārggam Kaḷi that we know of are from the Knanaya Christians community, an endogamous group among the St. Thomas Christians. By the twentieth century, the performers of this art form came from the Knanaya community. Therefore, the Knanaya community deserves credit for preserving and continuing a performing art tradition, which

might have been a common patrimony of the St. Thomas Christians in Kerala.

Men or women?

P. U. Lukas listed the songs of Mārggam Kaḷi under the category of āṅpāṭṭukaḷ (Men's songs) (Lukas [1910] 2002: 116-155). Until the middle of the twentieth century, only men performed Mārggam Kaḷi. Fr. Jacob Vellian persuaded the Kerala State Minister for Education to include Mārggam Kaḷi as an item in inter-school youth festivals. This led to a resurgence of the art form among the Catholic youth. In a recorded conversation in 2018, Fr. Vellian said that his goal was to keep the art form alive because it was on the decline. In any case, the introduction of Mārggam Kaḷi in inter-school youth festivals became a watershed in the history of this art form. The dance vocabulary changed in order to accommodate the female body.

All in all, Marggam Kali is a symbol of the cultural synthesis of Christianity in India.

Joseph J. Palackal, CMI

New York

25 June 2020



**A digital archive of Christian Art, Books,
Manuscripts & Manuals, Imagery Literature and Music.**

Support Our Ongoing Projects

- Marggam Digital Library of Christianity in India.
- Aramaic Project - Reclaim Syriac to Reaffirm Identity.
 - Encyclopedia of Syriac Chants.
 - Resources for Researchers.
 - Directory of Christian Songs.
 - Christian Arts / Music Iconography.



C H R I S T I A N
MUSICOLOGICAL
SOCIETY OF INDIA
www.TheCMSIndia.org

An international forum for interdisciplinary discussion, and dissemination of
knowledge, on Art, Literature and Music of about
thirty million Christians in India