

The indigenous tradition of Syrian Christians of Kerala a perspective based on their folk songs: marriage, customs and history

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Abstract: This essay attempts to delineate the original structure of Christianity practiced by the Syrian Christians of Kerala and relates it with their folk songs on the one hand and their current customary practices on the other. In the process the paper traces the historians' views on the early Christianity in Kerala, finds the historical elements in their folk songs, describes marriage ceremonies, songs and dances, and presents the texts of the folksongs.

The original structure of Christianity practiced by the Syrian Christians of Kerala is a subject of interest as this community mainly centred, only, in Kerala and they claim to be one of the oldest Christians in the world. They believe that they had converted to Christianity as early as 52 AD by one of the apostle of Christ, St. Thomas and they had a Brahmin ancestry prior to their Christian conversion. This claim and many of their other claims are not, according to some historians, substantiated with historiographically accepted convincing evidences. The length of discourse on this subject may continue endlessly, since as writing perfect objective history is a problem. The introduction of early Christianity in this part of Indian subcontinent might have happened because of the trade relations that this region had established with countries in the Mediterranean region from ancient times; and it might also reflect the socio-political developments in these region on the basis of this relationship. As corollary to this we could find the existence of all Semitic religions in Kerala and the tradition and practice of which are different from other parts of the

world; and this is a testimony to the cultural exchange that had taken place with the trade relations. Historiographically confirmed sources have accepted that the Islam was introduced in Kerala soon after it had taken birth in Arabia. Contextually, the religious practice of Islam in Kerala is influenced by the Arab tradition in contrast to the Islam practiced in other part of India which is generally influenced by Persian tradition. Unlike the profound account on the presence of Islam in this region, there are certain evidences of the presence of Judaism and Christianity from the early centuries. When we observe these aspects on the basis of trade relation, we could understand that some time in the early centuries, with the natural assistance of trade and commerce, all these Semitic religions have founded their roots in the land of Kerala. When a religion or culture takes its root in a new land, a new folk culture subsequently takes roots together with it. The folk culture need not be a source of historiography, but certainly it is a source for understanding what the people think about themselves and how they want to be accepted in the society they are destined to live in.

This paper tries to investigate the folk tradition of Syrian Christians of Kerala as what is explained in their folk songs that are sung at various social occasions. The attempt here is confined only to discern what the community thinks about themselves, not to validate the historicity of their origin and existence in the land of Kerala. I do not think those information given in the discussions are sufficient enough to attempt such an effort. These songs also are not properly validated historically and here too the paper does not like to make an attempt in that direction. What is revealed in those songs are indicative of the community's aspirations.

The historians' views on the early Christianity in Kerala.

Kerala is one of the states in India which have a distinctive history that it is different, in many respects, from other parts of India. One of the notable reason is that might have given such a history is because of its close proximity to the countries by sea route through the Arabian Sea with the West Asian and Mediterranean regions from the ancient times. The spices rich region of Kerala was a prime centre of Maritime trade of the ancient world as it falls in the spice route and major civilisations such as the Greeks, Romans, Jews and Christians had visited this region. Among them the Jews and Christians from Jerusalem, Mesopotamia and Babylonian regions were a long time trading partners. (Edward Gibbon-Decline and Fall of the Raman Empire-1946, p.41). The varieties of rare Spices grown in the region of Kerala (Malabar) were paper, Ginger, turmeric and Cardamom, which were essential commodities of ancient trade, especially the trade with Europeans. In the ancient European

method of food processing and preservation those spices grown in Kerala, especially the pepper, was an important ingredient. Pepper was considered as the king of the spices, the black gold, for many centuries just because of its unique food flavouring and preserving quality. It gave value of possession to one who trades it; as a result, traders and countries from various part of the world, used to compete with each other for establishing control over trade on these important commodities. Another added attraction for traders to come to the Malabar Coast (Kerala coast) was to trade rare and exceptional varieties of precious and semiprecious stones from the region that fall beyond the Western-ghats which is, at present, in the state of Tamil Nadu. The ancient trade were mostly centred on the place described in the ancient records as Museries (the place is identified as Kodungalore in the present Kerala). The history says that ships from southern Babylonia (the present Basra in Iraq) used to land at this port town and go back with huge loads of cargo of spices and other commodities. It used to take 40 days to travel by ship from any West Asian port to the Kerala Coast; after a brief stay in this part of the world, mostly the traders used to return to their native land (Pliny, Natural History, Vol.II, p. 419.). The traders were highly respected as they brought wealth. The history of trade of this commodity with other civilisation is a very long one: At first the Greeks and then the Romans followed by the Jews and Christians and then the Muslims who controlled the trade for long time until Europeans discovered the route to India with sole purpose of controlling the trade of pepper.

Some historical records explain that in 1st century itself, there was the presence of Christianity in Kerala. It is based on the following referential accounts: the Jewish settlers who migrated to Kerala in the year 68 AD had recorded that there were Christians in Kerala; similarly a travelogue by Pantaenus, the head of Alexandrian school who visited Kerala in the 2nd century also referred to a flourishing Christian community there. (A.Sreedhara Menon, History of Kerala, p, 107 1967). As mentioned above there was migration of Jews to Kerala coast in the year 68 AD. Similarly, much later but as early as eighth century there was another migration of Islamic religion to the Kerala coast, soon after it introduced in Arabia. The Muslim traveller Suleiman (852) recorded this (A. Sreedara Menon, op cit 109).

The community of Syrian Christians believes that they are converted into the faith of Christianity as early as 52 AD, when St. Thomas visited India with a trade ship that landed at Museries. The Christians of Kerala is known as Thomas Christians after the disciples of Jesus who is well known in the Christian literature as doubting Thomas, and who took the mission of spreading Christianity in Persia and India. The community believes that they were converted to the noble faith of Christianity by

this apostle of Christ from the noble Brahmin community of Kerala in the 1st century itself. The name Syrian Christians, according to a description in the Nation master Encyclopaedia, means Aramaic speaking Jewish tradition. It has more to do with a tradition and culture in the early Christianity than an ethnic group. The Kerala Christians also known as Nazranies, who according to the Nation Master Encyclopaedia refer to, the early Christians who converted from Judasism and believed that Jesus as the Christ and they followed Jewish tradition. The term Nazarenes was first mentioned in the Bible (Act 24.5). The classical language Aramaic also called Syriac and the name Syrian Christian also may mean that the people who follow the liturgy in Syriac.

Their religious practices and liturgy are Chaldean rites and the language and the liturgy in Syriac a form of Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus. They were also under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Oriental Patriarch of Celusia-Ctesiphon of Persia (Babylon) until the arrival of Portuguese in the 15th century. However we cannot discount the ethnic fact that there are two major divisions in the Syrian Christian community in Kerala since its inception in Kerala in the ancient time. The one who converted to Christianity in the 1st century are believed to be from indigenous native Keralites' community known as Northies (Vadamumbhagakkar); the second community is said to be migrants of a Jewish Christian community from west Asian region and they are called Southies (Thekkumbhagakkar). Those two are named so because of the ethnic reasons as the first group claim to have originated from the conversion of the natives while the other group claim to have migrated to Kerala during 4th century. Most of the folk songs that we are going to examine are sung by both these groups, except a few sung by southies alone.

There is a lot of confusion among historians about the authenticity of a Brahmin conversion in into Christianity in the early centuries as there was no Brahmins in Kerala at that period; the Brahmins in Kerala are considered to have migrated from the mainland of India to the region of Kerala during the 8th and 9th centuries. One of the possible argument that can be accepted as authentic is the opinion put forward by Zacharias Thundy, of Northern Michigan University that the early Christian of Kerala are a mixture of the native Munda Dravidian converts and the Jewish converts. The popular history has not settled this question with very clear and definitive evidences. The other group, the southies, are 72 Christian families from around Baghdad, Nineveh, and Jerusalem who came to the Kerala coast in the 4th century under the leadership of a Trader from west Asia Called Thomas of Cana (the place where Jesus turned water into wine). The Syrian Christians who were in Kerala earlier to this and who settled in the northern side of Kodungalore river and

thus known as northies and those who migrated from the west Asia and were allowed to settle in the southern side of the river are called southies. This type of migration could have happened over different periods of time.

In the ancient Kerala Christians and Jews were given rights to do trading and establish trade guilds; there are many historical records showing their rights to perform these rights are available in the form of copper-plate edits. During 849 AD there was a copper plate edit executed by the King Ayyan Atikal Tiruvatikal conferred several important rights and privileges to Christians. This edit is one of the very important sources of Kerala history and is known as Terrisapally copper plate edits. (Variar 1991, 118). This edit was given by the king to a leader of Christian community called Maruvan Sapisso which was mainly about the land allotment for building a Church at a place near Quilon, and it also describes many important historical aspects about the social status, religious belief, relations with other communities, of traders and merchants from Persia, Jerusalem and Babylon. The copper plate edit is considered as one of the most important original source for Kerala history. Another important inscription available as historical record is the Tazhakad Church inscription of the King Rajasimha (1028-1043 AD), in which, two Christian merchants, Chathan Vadukan and Iravi Chattan, who were members of the Trade Guild Manigramam were given certain important privileges and rights. (Variar, 134) In another copper plate edit which is available as a historical record is the one given by Vira Raghava Chakravarti to a Christian merchant Iravi Kortanan chetty as the leader of the trade guild Manigramam. (Variar, 135) The rights and privileges allowed for these communities were meant, mainly, for the smooth conduct of their job (trading) and for their normal social and religious life.

In the ancient historical Kerala records, there are mention about two trade guilds, one is controlled by the Christians, the Manigramam; the other is by the Jews, known as Anchuvakam. (Variar, 136) There were a flourishing Jewish community of traders, merchants and other settlers in Kerala, and they were said to have migrated from Judea in the year 68 AD, after the religious prosecution they had to experience with the advent of Christianity in that region. The Jewish people used to come to Kerala for trade much earlier to this migration. When the Israel state took birth during 1948, the major population of Kerala Jews migrated back to the Promised Land. A very few Jewish families are living in Kerala now, and among them two or three families belong to the original Kerala Jews, brown Jews. Though this community enjoyed full freedom and privileges under the rulers of Kerala, when the Portuguese took reign in the central part of Kerala they had to face severe religious prosecution; fearing the Portuguese tyranny many of them converted to Christianity or Hinduism.

There is no clear evidence to prove this but this is a very pertinent popular belief.

Elements of History in the folk songs

These songs are describing, among many other things like customs, tradition and habits of the community, the oral history of Syrian Christians in a very characteristic manner. Especially with regards to the segregation of the community into two divisions, the songs have their own explanation which are much different from the historical facts. Here the division of community into two is not because of the earlier group and later group or the one who are natives and the other who are foreigners but due to internal conflicts and quarrels and that resulted in the division as southies and northies. May be the division of the community into two on the line of emigration and conversion in different times could be a superiority seeking technique adopted by each group. The northies always show superiority over the southies of being from a native high caste community; on the other hand the southies show superiority holding on to their puritanical attitude of being the most ancient Christian community originated from the land of Christ. Except with a certain difference in ritualistic practices at the time of marriage etc, both these groups have generic similarity in rituals, habits and tradition, and food habits.

Since the subject of narration in some of the folk songs are indicative to the history, we get a comprehensive yet more vibrant idea about this history, certainly, in a different way. This song which is called Vaaddimanam Vattakali (Blue mind round boogie) gives a picture of the Syrian Christians. Since the protagonist of the song is an expatriate coming to the Kerala coast in a ship and explaining what he has seen there. The song goes like this: "He says he has seen the dreamy land of Kerala and its great King who is benevolent and kind to them and their leader. The great King offered them lands and ownership titles on them, and allowed them to build a Church for St. Thomas (Marthoman). The Church comes up in great marvel with four walls around and surrounding drenches after the walls (to protect it from the wild animals); it also was decorated with big towers (Gopuras) and built noteworthy Mansions inside the compound.. The great king of Kerala (Chera) conferred the community of Syrian Christians with 72 special rights. With a lot of fanfare the township was opened. At the same time conflict and quarrel broke out in the community resulting in the breakage of it into two units the one chosen to be in the northern side of the northern tower of the church in the township with 400 families known as the northies and the one preferred to be in the southern side were with seventy two families known as the southies". (P. J. Thomas, Syrian Christian of Malabar, 1938, p.16)

One of the folk dances, which is well known even today or one that goes synonymous with the Syrian Christians is the folk dance called Margam Kali. This is a type of folk dance similar to certain traditional dances practice in Chaldea (a region in Iraq) (P. J. Thomas, Syrian Christian of Malabar, 1938, p, 25); another opinion about this form of dance is that it is similar to the Yatrakali (A folk dance form showing martial moments) of the Namboothiri Brahmins (M.V. Vishnu Namboothiri, Dictionary of folklore, page 529). This dance is performed by 12 men standing around a traditional oil lamp and move rhythmically with the musical support based on a folk song. The movements are expressions of manliness and physical prowess. The performance pattern of this folk dance begins from the soft feminine movements accompanied with rhythmic songs to strong movements ending in fighting movements followed by a performance showing skills in weaponry. The accompanied songs are very important that they describe about St. Thomas, his advent into India, his sacrifices to promote Christianity and his heroic death. These songs are based on a book written by a Syriac (language) Scholar, Barsenanisse, the Acta Thoma (E.M. Philopose, Kottam, 1929, p. 43). The narrations in this book are made into different songs and sung along with the dance performance. One of the songs describes a discussion between Christ and Thomas before he set to leave for India.

The theme of the song is as follows: “Oh lord, will you protect me in that land ‘Hind’ where snakes and such dangerous animals are in plenty. The land where life and practices are different; where alien languages are spoken; where there is no distinctive difference between forest and inhabited areas. Oh my lord, you should not desert me in such situation. The land where very different things happen such as: the dead bodies are decorated and respected and the dead bodies are burned like fish and then buried; when fighting they don’t even consider blood relations, no difference between father and son, rivals fight irrespective of their emotional and blood relations, for them, wars are to be fought to be won; in the same manner sons wont care for their fathers in the course of war. This tradition of them is very different from other places”. To these fears of Thomas, the Christ answers: “You, please don’t think, that you are alone in this expedition of yours, I am there with you always; that feeling would remove all fears from your mind. You please understand that the land of ‘Hind’ is inhabited by human beings, and you should know that human being too has animal nature in him and thus they fight. I am sure your kind words and deeds would transcend the limits of languages and you could certainly reach to their minds with compassion and love”. (P. J. Thomas, op cit).

Another important folk dance of the Syrian Christians is Parichamuttu kali (Shield tapping dance), as the name suggests, it is a

war dance where the performers express their shield and sword skills in a rhythmic manner so as to express the adroitness and dexterity of seasoned fighters. This performance is said to be an extension of Margamkali. The themes of the songs are also from the history of St. Thomas and his advent into the land of Kerala.

A song that is sung along with the parichamuttu kali is a giving a pictorial narration of St. Thomas's death at a mount near Madras (now known as St. Thomas mount) and it says St. Thomas appeared on the top of a Peacock and a hunter sent an arrow and it wrongly struck at St. Thomas. The song goes like this: On the top of a Peacock Marthoman (St. Thomas) appeared in the land of Mountains (the Kerala coast is known in the Syrian Christian records, Malankara); he went to the Yathamba Mala (St. Thomas mount in Madras). Hay, hunter! The hunter, who took bad deeds as a way of life and lived a full life doing only bad deeds, tell me the way to the town of Mylapore. The ignorant hunter replied 'which way Peacock' and shot an arrow, it lost the way and went to hit the Lord; feared hunter fallen at the feet of the Lord and cried at him saying you are my God. The Chozhan king, in his fort, was playing brilliantly with his sword; before removing hand from the arrow, proclaimed, I am immortal and I won't die" (P.J. Thomas, op cit, p.28). The Mylapore in this song is considered to be in land of Chozha Kingdom.

Another important song that illustrates history of this community on its migration to other principalities of Kerala is runs like this: "Every one in the gathering expressed 'for us to do the worship to the God, we need a place'. We needn't mention about the rights we enjoy in the Chera (Kerala) Kingdom. The Kingdom of Thekkenkoore is a part of Vambanad region and we requested the king our desire to have a Church for our Lord Jesus Christ". In the ancient time the Kerala region of today was ruled by many kings apart from the Cheras (after whom the name Kerala came). The land of Thekkankore and Vadakkankore kings invited Christians from the Chera region to come and settle in their land, seeing the relatively high prosperity this community could bring to their country.. Even today the majority Christian regions in the modern state of Kerala have traditional Syrian Christian population in these regions. At present the Districts of Ernakulam, Trichur, Kottayam, Idukki, Alappuzha, Pathanamthitta and Quilon are the main centres of Syrian Christians in the state. To the rest of the regions the Christian population are migrated from this area.

In Kerala there is a community of traditional singers called Pāṇan or (Bāṇakas as given in the Buddhist literature). This group of people preserve within themselves an oral narrative tradition as a part of their culture and tradition. They sing in praise of the masters for mostly getting

gifts. This community is a visiting community to any community they go; therefore, their interpretations are considered as an independent third perspective about anyone they sing in praise. There are many Pāṇanpāttu in praise of the Syrian Christian community. Here the Pāṇan sings in praise of the Syrian Christians who received special favours from the King for the help they rendered. The king who lost most of his workers caste, the community of people who were potters, black smiths, gold smiths, and barbers, who left his country of Kerala to the land of Lanka (Sri Lanka), on a misunderstanding with the king. The leader of the Syrian Christians Thomas of Cana, on a request from the king, went to Srilanka and brought back the members of all those workers home. Thomas of Cana was successful in his mission of bringing those expatriates back home also he was successful in bringing some of the natives of Lanka (or Elam). On return, the king offered Thomas and his people special privileges and the artisan who returned offered a crown to him. The authenticity of this song may not be verifiable but at the same time it says about the traditional relationship Kerala enjoyed with the Srilankan Island and also one of the main communities in Kerala is called Ilavas (the name after Ielam), who are from the land of Ielam (Srilanka); at least a part of them might have emigrated from Srilanka. Historians agree on this point. The Ilavas are a very flourishing community in Kerala. Most of the folk songs of the Southies group among Syrian Christians consider Thomas of Cana as their sole leader and most of the songs mention his name. In above song also the person who has gone to Srilanka may not be Thomas of Cana but this obsession to depict him as the sole leader would have brought his name everywhere. We can see this in a few of the other songs too.

The song named Nalloreroḍalem (gorgeous Jerusalem) goes on like this: In the gracious town of Jerusalem where the stone of Emerald flourishes; our leader shines like a Peacock one who can be called in as the purified gold, and whose tone of voice is like that of a Chinese flute; he is the one who is committed to the way of the Christ. He wanted to go and live in the land of Mountains (Malanadu- Meaning Kerala), so that he sought the blessings and permissions from the Bishop (Bhava-Syrian Christian term for Bishop) and then he started off on his journey. With him he carried the honours due for him as the leader of the expedition from the Catholicate (the Bishop House), also received the most honourable Bible from the hands of the Baba. (P.J. Thomas, op cit 1938, p.14)

The song called Munnaḍ Malankara (formerly arrive in Malankara—the term Malankara is used for representing the Malabar Coast (Kerala), Meaning the land of mountains—The Syrian Christian Church is known as Malankara Syrian Church). The song says how the Syrian Christians from Jerusalem have arrived in the Kerala coast and how they were

received to this land of mountains; “To immigrate to the Kerala Coast, the honourable Thomas of Cana took initiative. He took 50 nobles and 400 others with the blessings of the Bishop, and he navigated them in a ship to the destination. The entourage arrived in the land of Cheras, met the great king, presented him with gifts of Gold, coral and other precious stones and sought permission to stay in his country.” After arriving in the Kerala Coast the life and times of the community is described in this part of the song: “The great king of Chera allowed us to practice our religion. For propitiating this, the king has executed a copper plate edit to the leader Thomas of Cana. The place he requested was given, for them to build a church and a township, and on another request, Thomas of Cana was given, the Architects who made the plan and artisans who built the township.” (P.J. Thomas, op cit, 1938, p.15)

The most important social event in the tradition of Syrian Christians is the Marriage function and the songs and dances connected with it. Each stage of marriage from the day of betrothal to the end marriage, there are different folk songs and dances.

Marriage ceremonies, songs and dances.

Typically the marriages of Syrian Christians are conducted in a very ceremonial way and it is very close to the tradition of other native Keralite culture but a lot similar to the tradition and culture of the Chaldeans as well. (P.J. Thomas, op cit, 1938, p. 3.) Most of the Marriages are arranged between families and there are many songs relating to the betrothal ceremony, as this is considered as a semi stage of marriage where the agreements are written on a palm leaf before the parish priest. Even today this agreement is known as *kuri* (palm leaf writing); after this, the parish priest presents the agreement of marriage before the members of the parish for their permission. This is meant to get any difference of opinion or complaints about either of bride or bridegroom, if anything exists, from its members of the public before they enter into the agreement of marriage, and this is done successively for 3 weeks and then the marriage is conducted. There is a popular song relating to betrothal, which is called *Māṅgalyam Vattakali* (Wedding circle hop).

The song brings the mood of this ceremony: “salutes the mother Mary for giving an opportunity for her blessings and requests the people who assembled there to forgive, like the mother who forgives everything for the deficiencies and shortcomings (with regard to the preparations); presents the bride as the girl with beautiful hair who was brought up by a good natured mother and a responsible father, and the father decides to marry his daughter after seeing his beautiful girl getting attracted to this handsome boy and given permission to him to marry his daughter.

From the boy's side: send gifts and pleasantries to the honoured father, and visit the girl formally to agree on the marriage and writes the agreement on a palm leaf and then the parish priest declares the marriage to everyone. And the message is spread to the four corners of the village and laid new roads for the occasion and made new courtyard for the feast to be conducted. Thus the wedding preparations moves on." (P.J. Thomas, op cit, 1938, p.3)

In olden times the wedding celebration of Syrian Christians were set for at least four days. The preferred date for marriage was the Sunday (final day); the previous day of the marriage that is the Saturday there are some interesting important functions. The bridegroom is brought before the relatives and others friend and makes him sit on a stool covered with a new white cloth. The first function is the offering to the Guru (preceptor) the master who first taught him to read and write. The next function is the make up of the bridegroom called Chandamcartu (adorning beauty), by the barber of the family (in ancient time, families had their own barbers). He would cut his hair and shave his beard in the latest fashion. Before starting his job he announces to the crowd of relatives and friends "whether I am allowed to adorn beauty to this young man" and then he waits for the approval of the assembled people. He starts his work after getting permission from them. Normally everyone shout in approval. This ceremony is conducted in the middle of laughter and gaiety. The barber would be adequately rewarded with praises and gifts.

Like adorning beauty to the bridegroom with a new style hair cut, a fresh shave of his beard and a new attire, the bride also will be given new make up and a new look for the wedding by the wife of the barber and relatives. This ceremony is called Maylanji-ideel (decorating with henna), as her hands and legs are beautifully decorated with henna after a ceremonial bath. Then she is brought to the family members and friends, and then they give her sweets and other refreshments. Similarly the boy is also brought before the assembled people and given refreshments.

Each stage of these ceremonies there are different types of songs and dances performed by the people in the either side. The first song before the make up ceremony is an invocation to St. Thomas, known as 'Marthoman'. "The invocation requests to the Saint to be a part of the function and brings it to the notice of Jesus Christ: let you come and visit this beautifully decorated marriage hall and let you look at the girl who has grown into a complete woman with a beautiful face, shoulders, legs, breast and the grace that is a gift of you. Even when I praise my girl, my mind is filled with sadness of loosing her but when I think about her fortunes-she acquire after marriage- my sadness melts away. Look at this girl of mine she is like the chrysanthemum flower that is born out of your

grace 'Oh Lord'! Everyone praises the girl as the immiscible (incomparable) beauty. I wish you Lord and everyone who assembled here should bring their blessing to this daughter who shines like a lamp." (P.J. Thomas, op cit, p.5)

When the boy is brought to the stool for the Barber to give his customary hair cut, shave and other makeup before the wedding the relatives and friends sing and dance together; the song for the occasion is called Chandamcharthu-pattu. Similarly at the girl's house too there is a song to go along with the makeup and decoration with henna; this song is known as Maylanchee-Pattu. This song is at its poetic best: "The lord was looking for Adam in the mountains. Eve too was on the mountain. The mountain that shines like a heap of sapphire stones on which the beautiful wife dance like a peacock. Oh dear Eve! You should blush like an embarrassed peacock because there was no henna. The Lord appeared and presents Eve to him for the women of the world to attain marital bliss. The hands that plucked the forbidden fruit should be covered with the herbal henna. Because she walked and eaten that fruit, the toes should be covered with henna. The hands were covered with mud, so the palms should be covered with the henna. Since Eve and Adam were ashamed of their sin and hidden themselves in shame, today these children are hiding themselves of that shame; we join them with the thread made using henna. As you have pardoned the sins of Adam and eve, you should free these children of their sins." (P.J. Thomas, op cit, p. 7)

The Sunday is the day of the marriage. It starts with a song called Āyanipāttukal (ushering in song); these songs are sung at the occasion of the accompaniment of the ceremonial carrying of the wedding gear such as the wedding necklace (a necklace with a secret tāli), the new Garments for the bride as a gift from the bridegroom's family, and the newly prepared sweets and snacks that would go with the entourage of the Marriage party. One of these songs describes about five Patriarchs (heads of Syrian Christian church) from Baghdad who came to Kerala on a request from three Keralites Mr. Ouseph (Joseph), Mr. Mathai (Mathew) and Mr. Geevarghese (Varghese) to the head of Chaldean Patriarch. Many historical aspects with the development of Church in Kerala are a part of these songs. There is another very nice song which is sung on the day of the wedding which happening the things depicts on that day.

This song is called 'Eṭṭithira-vattakali' (Eṭṭithira-hop). This is sung by the northies by men alone and in the tradition of southies by both men and women. The main activities of the wedding party and the preparation are given descriptively in this song: "All the relatives and friends are invited; best of things required are brought. They are perfumes, dresses like long shirt and dhoti for the boy and white gilded top and

dhoti for the girl. The bride and bridegroom with accompaniment of friends who are well dressed for the occasion move to the Church: the town has woken up for the occasion; good lamps, good people of the town wearing good crafted ornaments, good cross decorated with garlands of coins, nice jewelleries made of stones more costlier than diamonds, ear-rings too are of precious stones; attractive headgear and decorations and the other spectacle preparations; the wedding party thus moves on to the church with all ritual preparedness so that the priest could officially pronounce the marriage. After all the rituals regarding marriage are over the marriage party would leave the church with the accompaniment of both the parties. These are accompanied by music party with singers, musicians and dancers; by the best of martial artists show their skills before the crowd, and with such a lot of fanfare and gaiety the party arrive at the house of the bridegroom. Beetle leaf is given to every one: the leaf on a silver plate, beetle leaf given to women folk, beetle leaf come in the preferred house, beetle leaf given to every one. The arrangements at the home cannot be explained in words”(P.J. Thomas. op cit, 1938, p.11).

Like this the boy who is dressed up in silk dhoti and a long shirt which is of knee length, is wearing an ornamented head gear and a beautiful golden cross around his neck. On the other side, the bride would be wearing a beautiful top (chatta-in Malayalam) in silk and a silk dhoti and then adorned with attractive ornaments. She would be decorated with different types of ornaments all over her body, neck, ear, waist, hand, angle and toes, and moreover her head would be decorated with a crown. The Syrian Christians used to have a lot of gaiety attached to their marriage. In ancient time very rich Christians used to bring the bridegroom to the wedding party on an elephant top with the accompaniment of musicians, dancers, martial artists, and all other such glitterati.

In some areas the bride and bridegroom are carried in carriages (pallakkus). When they arrive at the house of the wedding party, in the south Kerala in the bridegroom's house and in north Kerala in the bride's house, they are received by the lady of the house with the accompaniment of girls pave the way by spreading flowers to usher the newly wedded couple to the specially decorated dais. The bride's party would sit in one side and the opposite side would be occupied by the bridegroom's party. In this occasion there is function called offering sweet to the newly wedded couple and this is the duty and responsibility of the uncle of the bridegroom. He first seeks the permission of the audience, by shouting three times “shall I offer the sweets” and after obtaining the permission of the assembled, he offers the sweets. After this function the members of both the parties starts singing various folk songs. These songs may be from what they have already sung during the other functions of the

wedding or some popular songs. With a spread of various types of food preparation in meat, fish and vegetables the meal will be served first to the guests and then to the family members.

After the feast and other rituals are over on the wedding day, there is a song in which blessings are overwhelmed to the newly wedded couple. The song here is called *Vāzhupāttu* (song of Blessings). The lines are as follows: "Blessings are offered to you. And you and your husband and your children should live long in prosperity. Let the earth give you all its bounties that you and your children would share (for their life). Let you be the custodian of everything, and you be the guardian of all those blessings. Let you be the one who will sow the seed and reap the harvest which would be doubled, and let you be the one who keep up the serfs well beings. And also let you be the one who may shower the grace of what is been given. The lord has given everything to see that everything happens on his will, And he has given crowning glories and he has given you a wealthy woman. And he requests you one thing in compensation. That all the best things happened to you from the blessings of your elders and that one of the elder received the Jewelleries. For all those things received are for the elders. {...}(P.J. Thomas, op cit, 1938, 17) In the tradition of Syrian Christians giving dowry at the time marriage was a tradition. This is given mainly for the couples to start a new life together. The song is very clear on these aspects. The women in the family are considered as the custodian of the wealth and prosperity of the family, a tradition followed even today. The song is clear that the wealth and money received by the boy should go to the parents as it is considered as the divine commitment, but as tradition such money is given back to the boy and girl to start of a new life together.

The last song to the marriage day is very interesting one and it is called *Ponnaīnthone* (one who adorned gold). This song is praising the Bridegroom for being the only reason for the occasion. The one who is the man of the day, who is accompanied by a crowd of people with dance and songs, who is presented before the waiting crowd witnessing the wedding, who is presented with the pictures with nice designs, who has the high quality stones like ruby and crystal, the special ones like as green cat's eye and coral beads. And above all what is presented to you is the holy cross, the sacred bell, the blessed beautiful flowers and fruits. Oh dear! Looking at their body (the couples), it is of the colour of the fruit *Koval* (*Brysnia Grandis*). And looking at it closely, it is of the colour of parrot's lips. Oh man, you look like the well treated precious stone and looking at you I forgot myself. Your belly's look is of the shape of tender Banyan leaf. You are one who becomes better day by day. You are the grace that could excite the most beautiful girls who have seen you coming. Oh little girl you are sitting pretty on the shoulders of a tallest man (to

witness this). (P.J. Thomas, op cit, 1938, 18) This song mainly admires the man (bridegroom) of the day as finale to the whole proceedings.

After the wedding day celebrations, all the invitees and guests return but the bride's mother, sisters and a few such close relatives stay back at the bridegroom's house and those days the bride's family is responsible for conducting feast and other celebrations. Every evening there will be dance like m̄argam kali, Vattakali, and other such dances. On the fourth day, there is a special celebration called Aṭacchutura (Close and open). This is considered to be a tradition of the ancient Chaldeans. This ritual is like this: evening the bridegroom and his friends get into the bridal chamber or another bed room; the assumption is that bride groom is unsatisfied with something that has happened during the time of marriage, and he is closed himself in a room. So in order to console the bridegroom, the mother-in-law knocks at the door of the bridal chamber and sings a song, requesting the boy to open the door. The boy opens the door only if the mother-in-law offers him things like Gold, Cow, landed property and such. When the mother-in-law makes those offers the friends of the boy shouts "we won't hear you, please say loudly" again and again, in order to make the girls mother pronounce her offers repeatedly and clearly. This is very a interesting function where the singing skills of mother-in-law plays an important role; otherwise she may become a laughing stock. Different types of songs are sung on this occasion and one of the famous one we see here: "the bridegroom has closed the door of the bridal chamber. Oh, the man who is known everywhere and having a name for himself and the man I am lucky to have as my daughter's husband. With happiness and delight, your mother-in-law and other ladies are surrounding the closed bridal chamber that you have closed. The lady who is the eldest in the group has knocked at the door first; the mother-in-law with her ornamented fingers has knocked next; the sister in law knocked next with her nicely ornamented fingers; the mother knocked at the door with a lot of concern. I will offer you beautiful utensils, like water jug, big plate; also you get, cot, bed, and a good lamp for seeing in the night; moreover I give you a silk cloth for covering the bed. Oh my dear son, the bridegroom, please open the door! I am giving you all these in writing, you please don't worry, I do this in secrecy. Oh handsome boy with best of features and my girl with beautiful disposition would make ideal couple to the envy of everyone. Oh friend's of the bridegroom can you hear me, if he is sleeping, you at least open the door; you know it is time for him to take bathe." (P.J. Thomas, op cit, 1938, p.22) There are almost six songs for this occasion but the one described above is the representation of the others. When the boy comes out from the room after the request from the mother-in-law, the next

ritual is taking a ceremonial bathe by the bride and groom. There are special songs to felicitate this occasion. The first song is called *Enṇapāttu* (Oil song). “With the grace of the eternal God, the bride and bridegroom divided a loin cloth and worn; they went and sat in the hall (the specially constructed marriage hall). For the groom the eldest aunt would apply oil before he takes bathe; the girls standing there song and danced in gaiety. The lady of the house (mother-in-law) received the couple with raw rice and water (a traditional way of receiving). The girl helps the couple with their hands to go into the pond.” (P.J. Thomas, loc cit)

There is another song, which is sung at this occasion. This is called *Kulipāttu* (bathe song) and it is sung at the time of the bathe of the bride and groom in the pond. It runs like this: “A well is made after digging the hill; a well is made after digging the soil. There is flower in the hair and the hair becomes wet; the head which used to be decorated with the flower also becomes wet; the neck which is of the shape of a conch also becomes wet; the chest which used to be covered with sandal paste also becomes wet; the back that is as beautiful as earth also becomes wet; the belly that is similar to banyan leaf also becomes wet. Using a golden pot he (the bridegroom) pours water on to his body; using a silver pot she (the bride) poured water on to her body. The boy asks for silk dhoti and shawl; the girl asks for silk dhoti and decorated top (*Chatta*). The boy asks for sandal paste in a cup; the girl asks for turmeric in a plate. He walks on a shoe (*methiyadi*) made of gold; she walks on a silver shoe (*methiyadi*)—*methiyadi* is a traditional shoe used in India. In the bridal chamber he sits, has various precious spices; the chamber where she sits, has precious cosmetics. This function that is conducted after the fourth day of the marriage calls the end of wedding celebration of the Syrian Christians.

Those songs are written in a language which is neither pure Malayalam of today nor the Tamil of today and this language is absolutely free of any Sanskrit terms. According to the historians the present Malayalam which is a mixture of Sanskrit and old Malayalam as used in these songs. It can be concluded that these songs were composed at a time before the introduction of Sanskrit in the popular tradition of Kerala culture. It is not possible to construct a historical perspective based on these songs, but they unreservedly explain the customs and tradition of the community since its inception in Kerala. It is clear that these customs are original elements from the Indigenous Kerala (Indian) tradition and the tradition of the Chaldeans or Mesopotamians. There are not many historical references about these songs other than the one written by a Portuguese historian who travelled to Kerala who recorded that he had seen Christians of central Kerala singing many folk songs (Maffei, *Historia*

Indiac (1558), Lisbon, p. 215) These otherwise explain a meta history which has gone in to the believes and convictions of this community for centuries. The term Chaldean tradition is a term often used in explaining there tradition.

The Catholic Encyclopedia defines Chaldeans as a Christian denomination of the Eastern Church. It states the term Chaldean as: "The name of former Nestorians now reunited with the Roman Church. Ethnologically they are divided into two groups (Turco-Persian and Indian), which must be treated apart, since in their vicissitudes one group differs considerably from the other. The first group is usually known as Chaldeans, the second as Christians of St. Thomas (also called the Syro-Malabar Church)." The purpose of this paper is not to investigate in to the history of Syrian Christians of Kerala but to see their folk tradition in an identifiable manner

The two divisions described earlier in the folk songs are now divided in to many groups. Some historical belief is that after the conversion of native Keralatites and the Nazranies (the Jews converted to Christianity) in the earlier times, there were constant migration from 4th century to 8th from the west Asia to Kerala. At present the community forms almost 10 % of the total population of Kerala and now they are divided into many denominations: the Syro- Malabar Church is a Catholic group in this community which has as described above joined to the Catholic church in the 15th century from the Nestorians. The syro- Malabar Church is the most prominent among the Syrian Christian groups today, and they form 44% of the total Syrian Christian population. The next prominent group is the Orthodox Syrian Christians. They also known as Myophilists, their supreme head is at Kottayam, Kerala, and they form 32% of the Syrian Christian population. The same Orthodox Church which accepts the Orthodox Syrian Church at Antioch is another prominent denomination in Kerala and they form 16 %. The other groups are: the Marthomite church which is protestant denomination among Syrian Christians form 11%: the syro-Malankara Catholics are 4.5 %; the original Nestorian Church that has not joined with the catholic church forms 1.5%; the Assyrian Church, the independent Jacobite Church etc also form the rest of the Syrian Christian population. It is interesting to note that all these groups irrespective of their denominational difference share a common tradition and culture. As we have seen in the folk songs we can see the two groups the northies and southies in modern times divided into church of various denominations. It is also interesting to know that a study of the Syrian Christian history would lead to the study of the history of Church in the world. On the demographic side the community has achieved 100% literacy, high life expectancy and high economic growth compared to all other communities in Kerala. They have contributed immensely in the

field of education, health care, industry, business and agriculture; one can see in Kerala the places where Syrian Christians live are relatively prosperous.

Texts of folk songs

<<Vaaddimanam Vattakali (Blue mind round boogie)>>

With blue mind, is it a dream they have seen in Mahodevar (Mahodayapuram)/
To find the way to see the beloved king, I went around/
From the sea I longed for that//
Let the one who have arrived at the shore be protected/
At the kingdom of you, with the compassionate mind of you//
Suddenly I woken up to the appearance of the city of Kodungalore/
The king we were searching for also appeared before us//
With your greatness and kindness, let you please protect us/
With a mind full of expectation we are coming to you to seek protection//
You issued the copper plate edit and made available the land we requested for/
And we with happiness and hope planned to make a church (palli) for Marthoman//
Thus we made the foundation on the place suggested/
And prepared the land nicely//
Compound wall, towers (gopuras), trench, mansions//
The rights given by the king are seventy two//
Fire works, blower, <different types of drum> murashu, maddhalam/
Thakil, para etc, and kottuvilakku <traditional lamp> and pāvāda <type of skirt>
Opened then closed the four gopuras /
As the people turned into groups as vanpar <one who has power> and
tharuthaikkal <one who sought refuge> and stared quarrelling//
From the northern gopura it was the northern side township/
Four hundred families are there in that group//
There are seventy two families from this side/
Town ship is called kananai which has mansion and compound wall//
(P. J. Thomas, Syrian Christian of Malabar, 1938, p. 16)

<<Margan kali pāttu>>

“You protected me with out being succumbed to sufferings/
That too becomes futile Oh! God//
The land of ‘Hind’ is inhabited with snakes/
And such deadly creatures//
...../
No calendar day, no favourable time, no familiar speech//
Oh lord! The land is full of jungle, you/
Left me in this in this land of obscurity//”
“The dead body is gracefully decorated/
The dead is burned and buried like fish//
When they are in combat they wont trust even the children/

And children too wont consider their parent differently//
 In all other places, Oh Lord, these two/
 Other man remains the same//
 Christ responds:
 "Such like laments of thoma <st. Thomas> when apprised/
 With the majestic presence, the lord Missihah <Christ> begin to say like this//
 Don't think deeply and worry as if you are alone <in this struggled>/
 I am also there with you to the places where you go//
 Human beings are living in 'Hind'; don't worry unnecessarily/
 All type of human beings are <irrespective of creed> are struggling animals//
 Your words, your looks would lend you a helping hand with language/
 All your thoughts are my thoughts; don't make a distance in understanding that//"
 (P. J. Thomas, op cit p. 27).

<<Nallororoðalem (gorgeous Jerusalem)>>
 In the gracious town of Jerusalem/
 Where pearls like emerald are reaped//
 The king who shines like a peacock/
 I call him - with appreciation - the pure gold (24 carrot)//
 Like the Chinese hoot, the leader's (king's) name is sound <everywhere>/
 The spirit for the way <Christian way> is-in any manner-not less for the leader (king)//
 And he want to go to the Malanadu (land of mountains) and rule there/
 With the order and instruction of the Bawa <head of Syrian Christians> he set off//
 And received the permission and blessings for the journey//
 Thus he has given various powers/
 He has given various powers as the leader of Christians (catholicate orders)//
 With accompaniments of royal band he has publicized/
 And handed over the holy book into his pure hands//
 (P.J. Thomas, op cit 1938, p.14)

Munnam Malankara (advent into Malankara)

To advent into Malankara <the land of Mountains> and immigrate there/
 The respectable man Thomman Kannai <Thomas Kannai> ventured in//
 The nine princes jointed together/
 The one who want to emigrate are four hundred in number//
 With the blessings of the Catholica <bishop of Syrian Christians> joined in the ship//
 Met the respected Chera king and offered various presents/
 With gold, corals and emerald entered into the country//
 (P. J. Thomas, op cit, 1938, p.15)

<<Māṅgalyam Vattakali (Wedding circle hop)>>
 To explain the vivacity of the wedding celebrations /
 Oh the omnipresent holy virgin, let me have your permission//
 All those who are sitting around here, if happened to see any shortcoming <on

the preparation of the marriage>/
Like the mother who forgets the limitations of her own child//
The girl with curly hair who's to a gracious mother/
Uttered to the beloved father rapidly //
The marriage time is near and promptly find a suitable boy/
Listening to these words, the father went on looking for a endearing boy//
Given permission to the would be bride groom/
Introduced promptly to the bridegroom//
Offered gifts and met the girl/
Decided on the marriage date and written//
Written like a picture on a fresh palm leaf/
The priest <Katthanār> announced it after the holy mass < holy Pooja>//
With pomp and gaiety the new spread the four corners <four directions>/
New way has been laid for the one who would attend//
Put a big barn and covered it with silk/
Put terracotta images under the shadow of light
(P.J. Thomas, op cit, 1938, p.3)

<<'Marthoman'>>
With the blessings of Marthoman starting here/
That everything should happen satisfactorily//
The gracious and true heart of Messiah/
Should summon here//
Gorgeous leader! Approach closer/
Into the auspicious barn//
With folded hands, I pray for you my dear daughter/
You the one I brought up//
Shoulders, thighs, face, breast/
Are praiseworthy//
My dear daughter, when I praise you more/
My mind getting trembled//
When rice and water is brought in/
My mind becoming clear//
The colour of the girl is equal to that of Chembaka flower (chrysanthemum)/
The girl born to the great graciousness//
Those who have seen the girl saying/
No one is comparable to her//
A good time should come for/
Seeing one like this//
All those who have assembled/
Should bring goodness//
The great leader <Thomas> and the Messiah/
Should be here as protection//
(P.J. Thomas, op cit, p.5)

<<Maylanchee-Pattu>>

The lord has searched Adam all over the mountain/
 Eve and her people are on the mountain//
 The mountain where emerald pearls shines/
 Where the wife who shines like a peacock//
 Hesitate like the peacock, you should also vacillate peacock!
 They two hid under that tree//
 At that time the lord appeared/
 As has been said in that evening, wife/
 Eve was given by the lord//
 It is for the virgins to be in marriage/
 The green leaf henna should be used for putting//
 It is because the hand was used for plucking/
 The palms should be covered with henna//
 Because the feet were used for walking to eat the fruit/
 Toes should be covered with henna//
 Because the bones were covered with mud/
 Hand should be covered with henna//
 Since they were ashamed on that day/
 Today too children are hidden //
 Because the henna thread has been faulted/
 Henna is used for making thread//
 Justice were given to the children/
 Shower your justice for everyone//
 (P.J. Thomas, op cit, p. 7)

<<'Eṭṭithira-vattakali' (Eṭṭithira-hop)>>

The bridegroom who received the blessings of Marthoman/
 Whose name is celebrated in all the eight directions//
 The virgin who received the best of blessings in this life/
 As the bride, with her ushers//
 Jewels, hair, ornaments extend down the hair length/
 Other hand rings and such ornaments are worn//
 Illustrious lady decorated differently her neck /
 With well crafted ornaments//
 On a high and beautiful crown,/
 Sitting pretty with admirable dignity//
 Girl's beautiful black hair decorated with gold,/
 And adorned a crown of flowers//
 The bridegroom shining like the sun at dawn/
 And near him <she> shines like the moon//
 The one who provide everything to the one who have nothing/
 Let your virgins protect these two//
 It is on the newly stitched cloths/

It is decorated with sandal and rare spices//
The friends who are known all over the world/
<Brought> flowers and gold with four handles//
Rings for all the ten fingers/
The plate of pure gold that shines like milk//
Ten to twenty beautiful girls in accompaniment/
With songs with the support of music//
Arrive at the barn slowly and/
Burned the lamps nicely//
To all arrive there//
(P.J. Thomas. op cit, 1938, p.11).

<<Vāzhupāttu (songs of Blessings)>>
Life that is a nice life given to you/
You, your husband and children together//
Live a long time/
Given a land with yield//
So share it between your children/
Loose not the wealth and the yield//
All the yield is for you//
All the harvest from seeds are for you/
To give salary to the slaves/
To bestow fame from grace//
To move in the path of His teachings/
Given crowning fame abundantly//
Wealth in the form of blessings are given/
And presented a thankful request//
The life the ancestors lived is/
With the grace of God, all, meant for you//
At that time opened the box/
Then the ornaments were received by the eldest one//
Worthy golden ornaments/
Each of them checked rightly//
Nice bangles are worn/
considered that it is sufficient for now//
Well crafted ornaments were worn/
For on the request of the husband//
Like the asafoetida tree I waited/
Wanted to see and waited for that//
Like the butter in the milk for you, I Kept you daily in my heart//
Listening to the songs the girls are singing/
The Father and the Son blessed//
More and jmore with the God's blessings/
For moving in his own path//

With the grace of Mar yakoba boonan//
 Oh the only great lord/
 Please pour your mercy on us//
 (P.J. Thomas, op cit, 1938, 17)

<< Ponnaṇintheedum >>
 To see the marriage celebrations/
 Gone in the decorated vehicle//
 The one decorated with peals and flowers/
 Moved in with gaiety//
 Escorted from front and behind/
 With dance and music//
 With the design of pearls pictures were presented/
 Precious Emerald and crystal were presented //
 Green beryl and pearls were presented//
 Respects on the holy cross, the best of respects were presented/
 Chrysanthemums fruits and golden flowers were presented//
 The colour of their body can be said to be that of Brysnia Grandis/
 The mouth looks like that of the parrots//
 From the light of the pearl which was well treated with calcium <chemicals>/
 One who have seen the bluish tint and forgot me//
 The one who have the belly in the shape of banyan leaf//
 The one who better day after day//
 The coquettish girls and the flirting girls/
 Would give a good part of their songs, come and sit here//
 To see the auspicious looking bridegroom's arrival/
 Oh girl! You sit on top of a high shoulder//
 (P.J. Thomas, op cit, 1938, 18)

<<Aṭacchutura pāttu (Close and open song)>>
 The bridegroom closed the door the bridal chamber /
 My dear bridegroom your celebrity is known everywhere//
 With happiness and gaiety the mother in law and her group at the door/
 With eagerness the good mother knocked at the door//
 Knocked with the hand of nice rings//
 The sister in law hand with beautiful rings knocked at /
 A dear elder sister came there and knocked at//
 Own mother came there with a lamp and knocked at //
 We give you a platter and we give you a nice vessel//
 We give you a cot, bed and for you to see a lamp//
 I give you a silk cloth for covering the bed//
 Oh dear bridegroom open the door of the bridal chamber/
 I will write these things in your name for you to believe//

The handsome man and lovely girl/
To live together both of you with out any problems//
If the bridegroom is hesitant to open, please let the friends open the door/
Let the door be opened it is the time for taking bath//
(P.J. Thomas, op cit, 1938, 22)

<<Enṇapāttu (Oil song)>>

With the grace of the God almighty/
The dear bridegroom together with the girl/
Each worn half of a same cloth /
As the custom suggests they went and sat in the barn//
The eldest aunt applied oil for the boy/
Skilfully finished the job and gave the bath cloths <for bath>//
The girls who assembled there cheered <by making sound from mouth>/
The girls who surrounded there helped them to stand up//
(P.J. Thomas, p.23)

<<Kulipāttu (bathe song) >>

Dug a mountain and made a pond that become empty/
Dug the earth and made a pond that become “empty//
The flower decorated hair and the flower too got wet//
The head which carries the flower too got wet//
The neck that looks like the conch got wet//
The chest which used with sandal too got wet//
The back which is like the land got wet//
The belly that is like the shape of a banyan leaf also got wet//
He poured water from a golden jug/
She poured water from a silver jug//
The boy asked for silk dhoti and silk handkerchief//
The girl asked for silk skirt and silk chatta (blouse)//
The body asked for sandal paste in a plate/
The girl asked for turmeric in a cup/
He walked slowly on a chapel made of gold/
She walked slowly on a chapel made of silver/
The chamber where he sits has the saffron oil/
The chamber where she sits have sandal and turmeric//
(P.J. Thomas, op cit, 1938, 24)

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