



The Ancient Christians of Kerala and their Cultural Integration with the Hindu upper Castes

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ABSTRACT :

Christianity originated in the Roman province of Judea. From there it spread all over the world. In the first century itself Christianity spread across the Mediterranean regions, Europe, and even India. The first roots of Christianity in India were traced in its extreme southern region, Kerala. Traditionally it is believed that St. Thomas, one of the 12 apostles of Christ, founded the Christian Church in Kerala.

The purpose of this paper is to bring out how the Kerala Christians were influenced by the local community, especially the Hindus, though Christianity was not a local religion, to begin with, in their own pattern of worship and social behavior. In almost every area of religious and social life of the Christians as a community one can observe amazing intercultural integration with the local communities, especially the Hindus. This paper brings to light several of the cultural adaptations from the Hindu community in the Christian way of life: (1) The Christians and the Nampoothiri Brahmins (2) Church celebrations in the model of temple festivals, (3) Similarities in dresses, (4) Similarities in marriage related rituals, (5) Similarities in child related rituals (6) Similarities in education related rituals, (7) Similarities in death-related rituals, (8) Superstitious beliefs and practices, and (9) Caste consciousness.

INTRODUCTION :

According to traditional belief, the ancient Christians of Kerala, variously known as St. Thomas Christians, Syrian Christians, Malabar Christians, or *Nasranis*, were initially converted by St. Thomas, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus Christ. These initial converts were believed to be from the local community consisting of the Buddhists, Jains, Arabs, Jews, and the Hindus (though some argue that Hinduism, or Brahmanism was a later development in Kerala). When this first community of Christians, who were disorganized and scattered after the death of St. Thomas, were on the verge of extinction for lack of organizational leadership, the immigration of the Persian Christians rejuvenated them to become a well-organized community. As a result of this Persian influx, the Kerala Christianity could associate itself with the Church of the East and was able to have a proper pattern of worship as well. However, though they were initially associated with the Church of the East, they never became a photocopy of the Persian Church, rather they maintained their own identity by amalgamating the local cultural elements along with those of the Persian Church. True, they accepted the Catholicos of Baghdad as their spiritual head and received the bishops sent by him with respect; and were happy to have local priests ordained by those bishops for performing the essential sacraments in the churches. However, by associating themselves with the diverse cultural elements of the then society, such as the Buddhists, Jains, Arabs, Jews, and the Hindus, as mentioned above, these early Christians developed their own pattern of worship and social behavior by amalgamating all the divergent elements, thereby forming an indigenous St. Thomas Christian culture of their own. Thus, it is said of the ancient Christianity, "*Nasranis* are Keralite in culture, Christian in faith and Syrian in liturgy".¹

In the later periods, when the Brahmins dominated the Kerala society with their deep-rooted *Jyathi* system, the St. Thomas Christians gradually adopted the social and cultural traits of the Hindus into their way of life, more than those of the other ethnic groups around them.

1. The Christian claim of Namboothiri descend:

Majority of the Christian communities of today believe that they are the descendants of the Namboothiri Brahmins converted to Christianity by St. Thomas. Though this claim cannot be proved historically, it is a fact that certain traits of this Brahmin community were observed in the Christians, even to this date. When the Portuguese first landed in Kerala, it is said that they were surprised to know Christian presence in this remote land, far away from their own, but could not distinguish a Christian from a Hindu Brahmin in his appearance and dress, as they looked similar. The Portuguese observed that the men from the Christian community had *kudumi* (a tuft of hair left uncut a little behind the centre of the head, having the rest of the part shaved), *kadukkan* (an ornament for the ear), and the *poonool* (sacred thread worn over the left shoulder and across the chest to the right hip) which were all characteristic features of the Namboothiri Brahmins. It seemed that the only striking difference in identifying a Christian gentleman from a Hindu Brahmin (male) was that the Christian wore a *kurishumala* (a necklace with a crucifix) over his neck or adorned the *kudumi* with a small cross. The Christians, the Portuguese had observed, also had maintained the purity concept and untouchability based on the *jyathi* (caste) system formulated by the Namboothiri Brahmins.

2. Church celebrations in the model of temple festivals:

Many of the rituals performed in connection with various church celebrations reflected the temple celebrations of the Hindus. The use of *Muthukudas* (ornamental umbrellas known as royal umbrellas), musical instruments, torches, pop guns etc. during *palliperunals* (church festivals), marriages, and other processions and festive occasions, was a tradition followed by the St. Thomas Christians borrowed from the Hindus. Also, *chendamelam* (traditional drumbeating), *vedikettu* (firecracker bursting) etc. were also part of the festivities of most of the *palliperunals*, adapted by the Christians from the Hindus. Dr. Joseph Thekkedath writes, "It is mentioned in some sources that up to about the year 1570 the Christian churches used to be built after the fashion of the local Hindu temples. Documents kept in certain Christian families show that Christians were trustees of certain Hindu temples and were invited for their festivals."²

It was a custom (and is even today) when the Hindus enter a temple, they remove their footwear and keep them somewhere near the main entrance. Similarly, before entering the Church, the Christians also keep their footwear outside. This practice is followed by the Kerala Christians even today. But this is not done by any of the Christian congregations in any Western countries as they consider footwear as part of their dress. Hence, we can categorically assure that this custom was borrowed from the Hindus.

3. Similarities in dresses:

The St. Thomas Christians' pattern of dress was also not much different from that of the high caste Hindus. The gents used to wear a single *dhoti* or *mundu* (a long piece of cloth, generally white; in modern times this single *mundu* has been replaced with 'double *mundu* ') that covered from the hip up to their feet. They also wore a *thalappavu* (clothe tied around their head that looks like a crown), over their *kudumi*, during formal occasions. When they don't wear any *thalappavu*, to differentiate them from the Hindus they used to wear a small cross on their *kudumi*, as mentioned earlier.

There were similarities between the dresses of the *antharjanangal* (Nampoothiri women) and the Christian women, as well. "The length of the *pudava* (the main item of dress of a Hindu upper-caste woman, generally a long piece of white cloth) of the Nampoothiri women and the length of the *kachamuri* (similar type of dress worn by a Christian woman) of the *nasrani* women were same, i.e., 10 yards each. And both were white."³ Both these *pudava* and *kachamuri* (commonly called *mundu*) had folds. These folds were in the shape of a palm-leaves-made fan, prevalent in Kerala. "The only difference was that the folds of the *antharjanangal* were in the front and those of the Christian women were at the back. Even the size of the *mundu*, (usually around 15 feet long) and its colour – mostly white, were also same."⁴ Similarly, the *antharjanangal* used to hold a *marakkuda* (an umbrella made of palm leaves, which was also known as *olakkuda*: *ola* means palm leaf, and *kuda* means umbrella) when they go outside of their houses. This tradition was also adapted by the Christian women.

4. Similarities in marriage related rituals:

Even the Christian marriages and other ceremonies reflected Hindu culture. "In tune with the prevalent Hindu culture, child marriage was also practiced by the Christian community. Almost in all cases arranged marriage was the practice; love marriages were seldom."⁵ As a custom, only the elders decide the marriage; the girl or the boy would not have any say in the matter. In some cases, the boy and the girl may not even see each other until the day of the marriage. However, in most cases the boy and the girl get a chance to see each other before the marriage. The boy along with his elderly relatives visit the girl's house to see the bride and to settle the marriage, which include the amount of money and the ornaments that should be given as dowry. This practice of going to the girl's house was known as *pennukanal* (bride viewing) which was derived from the Hindu practice. Similarly, the *minnu* or *kettuthali* (the small gold ornament fastened on a thread for the wedding knot) of the Christian women and of the *antharjanangal* respectively were almost the same, as "both have the shape of a peepal leaf. The only difference seemed to be that the Nasrani *minnu* has a small cross on it."⁶ The twisted thread to which the *minnu* or *thali* was fastened for the wedding knot used to be taken out of the *manthrakodi* (the bridal attire/sari), by both the communities. The bridegroom ties the *minnu* or *thali* round the neck of the bride in both cases. "The Nampoothiris call the marriage *penkoda* (giving away the girl) and the Christians call it as *pennukettu* (tying the knot on the girl). Both had (and have it indirectly even today) the practice of dowry system. Both used to make (wedding) pandal and the women from both communities used to do *kurava* (a shrill sound produced by vigorously moving one or two fingers in the mouth)"⁷ to make the occasion more exciting and mirthful.

"One of the indispensable customs of the Nasrani marriages (adopted from the Hindu custom) was *gurudakshina* (giving offering to the guru and other elders of the community)"⁸ Just before going to the Church for the marriage, the bridegroom and the bride, at their respective houses, would stand on a mat spread on the floor east to west, facing their respective guru. Then the groom/bride would offer *dakshina* to the guru. This *dakshina* generally comprises of new dress, betel leaf, areca nut, tobacco, and money. There is no specific amount fixed for the offer of money, which depends on the financial position and mental attitude of the parents of the groom/bride. After that, the groom/bride would prostrate before the guru, touching his feet and seeking his blessing. The guru would help the groom/bride to stand, place his right hand on his/her head, and bless him/her by offering all the best wishes in life. After giving the *gurudakshina* to the guru, the same ritual is repeated in front of the elders of the community as well, whoever was present at the occasion, but without prostrating.

In both communities, a boy never married a girl who was older than himself. Also, marriage within blood relations was prohibited in both communities – for the Christians till the 7th generation and for the Hindus till the 5th generation.

Since the marriage was considered the most important event of one's life, it was conducted with due pomp and publicity as done by the Hindu community. "A lot of money was being spent for the rituals in connection with the wedding: for the vehicles, ornaments, ornamental umbrellas, the music party, and several days of feasting. It was estimated that an amount equal to half of the dowry money was spent on these festivities. ... The dowry comprised of land, ornaments, and money."⁹

As done by the Hindus, on the evening before the wedding *antham charthal* and *mylanchi ideel* were performed. *Antham charthal* was a ritual performed at the residence of the bridegroom. The bridegroom will be seated at one end of the wedding pandal, and a barber will do the hair cutting and shaving for him. After this, his body would be applied with oil, and he would be led to the bathing area for a bath. *Mylanchi ideel*, on the other hand, is a ritual performed at the residence of the bride in which the bride's hands and legs are applied with a red paste made from the flowers of a plant called *mylanchi*. The bride would be seated on a stool covered with white cloth for the purpose. Before *mylanchi* paste was applied, ladies would sing traditional Mar

Thoma songs. Then they would sing *mylanchi pattukal*, usually songs related to the fall of Adam and Eve, while others apply the *mylanchi* paste on the hands and legs of the bride.

5. Similarities in child related rituals:

Jatakarma (horoscope) was performed in the case of the Hindus as soon as a child was born (This is done even today in many Hindu families). This was to welcome the child into the family. This was followed by putting some honey on the child's tongue and whispering the name of God in its ear. In the same fashion, the Christians also used to check the *jathakam* (horoscope) of the newborn child, during which time honey in which gold is rubbed was given. "During this time, *namakarana* (name giving) was also done. After saying softly into the child's ear *Moran Eesho Mashiha* (Our Lord Jesus the Messiah), the name of the child is also said softly into his/her ear."¹⁰ This custom was generally known as *ponnum thenum kodukkal* (giving gold and honey).

Another practice adopted by the Christians from the Hindus was *annapramsham* or *choroону* (rice feeding). By this custom rice was fed to the child for the first time. It was generally done when the child was six months to one year old. Different authors set the date differently. According to Placid J. Podippara, "When the child was 11 months it is fed with boiled rice in the midst of members of the family."¹¹ Samuel Meter has a different version regarding this. According to him, "when the child is one year old, *choroону* (the feeding of rice) was carried out with some festivity."¹² He also says that the maternal grandparents present an *aranjanam* (a thread tied around the waist, with the belief that it would give protection for the child) made of gold during the occasion.

Also, adapted from the Hindu custom, the ritual called *irupathiyettu kettu* was performed on the 27th and 28th day after birth respectively for boy child and girl child. A black thread was tied around the waist of the child, believing that it would safeguard him/her in life. Though for boys the thread is tied on the 27th day and for girls on the 28th, the ritual is called *irupathiyettu kettuka* (tying on the 28th).

6. Similarities in education related rituals:

The ritual that marks the beginning of education for the child was another practice followed by the Christians borrowed from the Hindu community. "When the child is four, he is prepared for admitting to *nilathezhuthu* (writing on the floor) *kalari* (training centre). This is a ritual in which the child is made to draw a cross over the raw rice spread on a *thalika* (plate). The Ashan (guru) holds on the right forefinger of the child and moves it over the rice to draw the cross. This is done in front of a cross and a *nilavilakku* (traditional lamp)."¹³ A Hindu child was helped to write OM instead of drawing the cross. After drawing the cross (or writing OM, in the case of Hindu child) over the rice kept in the *thalika*, "the Ashan presents the child a palm leaf on which a prayer and the letters of the alphabet are written. Receiving it with both hands, the child offers *dakshina* (fees) to the Ashan."¹⁴

After this preparatory ritual for the very elementary education, the child is ready to join *nilathezhuthu kalari* (also called *kudippallikoodam*, or Ashan *pallikkoodam* or *ezhuthupallikkoodam*; *pallikkoodam* is a combination of two words - *pally* means church, and *koodam* means a hall or building. The Christian missionaries had started elementary learning centres attached to their churches, hence the name *pallikkoodam*). An Ashan *pallikkoodam* generally functioned at the residence of the Ashan. Once the child is admitted to this Ashan *pallikkoodam* he/she will be provided with *panayolas* (palm leaf; *pana* is a palm tree, and *ola* is its leaf) according to the progress of the learning, since Malayalam alphabet has 56 letters (14 vowels and 42 consonants). Even elementary Arithmetic was also taught in the Ashan *pallikkoodam*. Over this *panayola* the Ashan will write the letters of the alphabet and numbers (as required) with a *narayam* (a long and pointed nail-like piece of iron typically used for writing on the palm leaves). Looking at the letters written on the palm leaves, the children practise writing them over the soft sand spread on the floor in front of them. This is why it is called *nilathezhuthu*.

7. Similarities in death-related rituals:

There are similarities in the ceremonies in connection with death as well. "There used to have a feast after a burial ceremony, which is called as *chatham*; this is conducted every year on the date of death. Such community feast was attended by rich and poor alike."¹⁵ Rev. Hormis C. Perumalil writes in this regard: "After the burial service was over a feast known as *pattinikanji* (starvation porridge) was served to all who were present. It is so called because no non-vegetarian item was served in this feast. The *chatham* or *shradham* periodically organized after the death were similar in both communities. The presence of a priest for the Christian rituals differentiated them from those of the Hindus."¹⁶ (But now a days the Christians serve non-vegetarian items as well.) Every year at the death date a similar feast is also organized. This practice is continued even today. In some cases, the *shradham* was conducted for 41 days after the demise. This was known as *nalpathiyonnu adiyanthiram* (41 days of feasting) among the Hindus, which was also observed by the Christians.

Generally, during a funeral service, food would not be prepared in the house of the deceased, in the case of both the communities. This is undertaken by a relative from another house or by a neighbor. Also, the immediate relatives of the deceased would not eat anything until the funeral service was over.

If the deceased person was the father, one of the sons would grow a beard. Z. M. Parret says, "When the father died, it was customary that one of the sons should grow beard and shave it off only after the observance of *aattachatham* (the yearly ritual for the dead). This is evidence that they had observed *pithru karmmangal* (observance of various rituals for the dead father), just as the Hindus do."¹⁷

8. Superstitious beliefs and practices:

The Christians even borrowed from their Hindu neighbours many of the superstitious beliefs of the latter. They "considered certain days as propitious and others as unpropitious for weddings and other important celebrations and undertakings. Often the *kathanars* (the priests) themselves furnished the required information regarding auspices and inauspicious days. Many people consulted magicians and fortune tellers in connection with marriages, sicknesses and thefts. Others invited magicians to their houses to perform ceremonies like killing of cocks. ... Still others wore the writings of the magicians as some kind of protection against sicknesses, or hung it round the neck of animals, or buried in the fields in the hope of getting an abundant harvest."¹⁸ It is understood that some of the *kathanars* even made use of such rites to keep the devils away.

Many of the superstitious beliefs, mostly borrowed from their Hindu neighbors, made the condition of the women folk quite miserable. Women were expected to be the well-wishers of their husbands, and their world generally ended within the four walls of their house, mostly the kitchen. Her role was

to care for her husband and raise children. “She wouldn’t get the desired honor or respect either from home or society. Not having children was considered a curse. So, the Hindus and Christians used to pledge *nercha* (special offerings to gods) to the temple and church respectively. But the birth of a girl child was not a welcome occurrence.”¹⁹

9. Caste consciousness:

Like the Hindu upper castes, the Christians also did not allow the lower caste people to touch them or approach them within the limit of a restricted distance. Even the converted Christians from the lower classes were kept aloof from their fold, as they feared that their class status would be hampered, as they were treated almost at par with the Brahmins. “They would wash themselves, like the Brahmins, in the event of touching a lower caste man or woman. They strictly kept the laws of untouchability and unapproachability, even towards the baptised members of the lower castes, like the other high caste Hindus. It was evident by this that the St. Thomas Christians considered themselves to be of superior caste, and as such, shunned the company of the new Christians.”²⁰ Like the high caste Hindus, the Christians would not touch or go near the lower castes. By chance if it happened, they would purify themselves by taking a bath. In public roads, the lower castes had to give way to them, and they had the right to kill anyone who violated this, as the Hindu higher castes had. However, “For the high caste Hindus, the touch of a Thomas Christian was sufficient to purify articles defiled by the touch or near approach of the low caste people. Hence the non-Christian kings often made the Thomas Christian families live near their royal residence in order to profit by their service to purify defiled articles.”²¹ Moreover these kings encouraged them to build churches by granting them tax-free lands. These churches built by the Christians “externally looked like non-Christian pagodas, the only Christian distinction being the crosses that were put up on the roofs and in front in the open air. The floor of the church (as that of ordinary Christian and Hindu houses) used to be painted with cow-dung. The lamps, umbrellas and other paraphernalia of the churches resembled those used in Hindu pagodas.”²²

Thus, we see that the ancient Christians of Kerala had developed a striking cultural integration with the cultural practices of their neighboring communities especially the upper-caste Hindus.

¹ Quoted from the post “Saint Thomas Christians”. Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Thomas_Christians#

² Thekkedath, Dr. Joseph. History of Christianity in India. Vol. II., (From the middle of the 16th century to the end of the 17th century.) Theological Publications in India, St. Peter’s Seminary, Bangalore 55, 1982, p. 139,

³ Perumalil, Rev. Hormis C. (Ed.), Kraisthava Vinjana Kosham (Christian Encyclopaedia), Prakasham Publications, Alapuzha, Kerala, 1975. p. 31

⁴ Daniel, Rev. Dr. Mathew. Kerala Kraisthava Samskaram (Kerala Christian Culture) Christian Sahithya Samithy, October 2015, Printed at Anaswara Printers, Ernakulam. p. 42.

⁵ Ibid p. 76.

⁶ Perumalil, Rev. Hormis C. p. 31.

⁷ Daniel, Rev. Dr. Mathew. p.42.

⁸ Thomas, Dr. Meledath Kurian. Nasrani Samskaram Desheeyatha, (Nasrani Culture, Nationalism) Sahithya Pravarthaka Sahakarana Sangham, Kottayam, 2018. p.127.

⁹ Mateer, Rev. Samuel. Njan Kanda Keralam (The Kerala that I saw), Kerala Bhasha Institute, Trivandrum, Kerala, 2010, p. 245.

¹⁰ Thomas, Dr. Meledath Kurian. p. 129’

¹¹ Podippara, Rev. Dr. Placid J., (The St. Thomas Christians of Kerala), Printed at St. Thomas Press, Alleppey, and Published by Prakasham Publishers, Alleppey, July 1972. p. 80.

¹² Mateer, Rev. Samuel. P. 320.

¹³ Daniel, Rev. Dr. Mathew. p. 76.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Paret, Z.M. Malankara Nasranikal (The Nasranis of Malankara) (Vol 2). Printed at Aruna press and published by Jacob Mathew Chemmarappally, Manganam, Kottayam, 1966. p. 218.

¹⁶ Perumalil, Rev. Hormis C. p. 33.

¹⁷ Paret, Z. M. p.11.

¹⁸ Thekkedath, Dr. Joseph. p. 25.

¹⁹ Mateer, Rev. Samuel. p. 310.

²⁰ Thekkedath, Dr. Joseph. p. 22.

²¹ Podippara, Placid J. p. 83.

²² Ibid.

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8. Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia: "Saint Thomas Christians". https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Thomas_Christians#