

September 2016

## The Tying of the Ceremonial Wedding Thread: A Feminist Analysis of “Ritual” and “Tradition” Among Syro-Malabar Catholics in India

Follow this and additional works at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/jgc>

 by College, [smthomas@colby.edu](mailto:smthomas@colby.edu)

Part of the [Anthropological Linguistics and Sociolinguistics Commons](#), [Asian History Commons](#), [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Catholic Studies Commons](#), [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons](#), [Comparative Philosophy Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), [Feminist Philosophy Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), [Folklore Commons](#), [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), [Hindu Studies Commons](#), [History of Christianity Commons](#), [History of Religion Commons](#), [Inequality and Stratification Commons](#), [Intellectual History Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), [Liturgy and Worship Commons](#), [Missions and World Christianity Commons](#), [Near and Middle Eastern Studies Commons](#), [Oral History Commons](#), [Other Anthropology Commons](#), [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Place and Environment Commons](#), [Politics and Social Change Commons](#), [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#), [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#), [Regional Sociology Commons](#), [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#), [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), [Sociology of Culture Commons](#), [Sociology of Religion Commons](#), [South and Southeast Asian Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Women's History Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Thomas, Sonja (2016) "The Tying of the Ceremonial Wedding Thread: A Feminist Analysis of “Ritual” and “Tradition” Among Syro-Malabar Catholics in India," *Journal of Global Catholicism*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 5. p.104-116.

DOI: 10.32436/2475-6423.1008

Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/jgc/vol1/iss1/5>

SONJA THOMAS

## The Tying of the Ceremonial Wedding Thread: A Feminist Analysis of “Ritual” and “Tradition” Among Syro-Malabar Catholics in India

In 2009, the Kerala Catholic Bishop’s Council (KCBC) issued a pastoral letter concerning new sects of Christianity that was read in Syro-Malabar Catholic parishes throughout Kerala, India. The pastoral letter was written to combat a growing number of Catholic-like Pentecostal churches that had been springing up in Kerala. In the following excerpt from the letter, the KCBC outlines the difference between Syro-Malabar Catholic teachings and Pentecostal teachings:

There are some in these new sects who teach that external objects are the root of the problems of faced by individuals and families. They teach that evil resides in the use of flowers, pictures of elephants and peacocks, the tying of the ceremonial wedding thread and use of oil- lamps...These preachers widely spread an idea that the evils spirits come to us through the objects which are adored by the other religious believers. In these sermons, these preachers show hatred towards the Hindu religion...the Catholic Church does not discard the truth and the sacredness of other religions. [Vatican II] has specifically stated that other religions are to be treated with sincere respect. Some preachers refer to other religions as contrary to Christianity. This is not in the view of the Catholic Church.<sup>1</sup>

The excerpt is particularly useful in determining what constitutes “tradition” for Catholics in the upper-caste Syro-Malabar rite and their difference from lower-caste Christians in India. In this paper, I examine why there is a focus

---

<sup>1</sup> “Pastoral letter issued by the Catholic Bishops of Kerala on the newly forming sects,” trans. S. Prema, <<http://kcbc.in/news-room/pastoral-letters>>, accessed October 15, 2009.

on defending the Hindu religion and certain practices within the Syro-Malabar Catholic community such as the tying of the ceremonial wedding thread and use of oil lamps. Using a feminist analysis of the intersections between caste and gender in practices within the community, I question why certain aspects of ritual have changed, while others—especially those concerning marriage and childbirth—are rigidly maintained under the guise of “tradition.”<sup>2</sup>

The community I discuss in this paper, the Syro-Malabar Catholics, are from a rite of Catholicism in the St. Thomas Apostolic tradition. They are part of a larger group of Christians known as the “St. Thomas Christians” or “Syrian Christians.” Today, Christians are only 2.3 percent of the population of India, but constitute 19 percent of the state of Kerala.<sup>3</sup> The Syrian Christians represent almost half of Kerala’s Christian population.<sup>4</sup> They trace their conversion to the year 52 A.D., when St. Thomas arrived on the Kerala coast and reportedly converted Brahmins to Christianity. Because they practiced their mass in Aramaic, the label “Syrian” was used to distinguish them both from the “Latin” Christians, who were converted by Portuguese missionaries in the sixteenth through seventeenth centuries, and from the Protestant Christians, who were converted by British missionaries in the nineteenth century. Western missionaries converted Hindus largely from the lower-castes and, to this day, there remains a glaring caste difference between upper-caste Christians of the St. Thomas traditions and other denominations. The Syrian Christian community is relatively affluent, leading all other religious communities in Kerala in land ownership,<sup>5</sup> and they are especially visible in the highly profitable areas of rubber tree cultivation, private education, and banking. There are many different denominations of Syrian Christians, but the largest group is the Syro-Malabar Catholics.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The intersections of caste and gender have been called “brahmanical patriarchy” by feminist scholars. See Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens* (Calcutta: Stree, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> <[http://censusindia.gov.in/Census\\_And\\_You/religion.aspx](http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_And_You/religion.aspx)>, accessed June 24, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> KC Zacharia, *The Syrian Christians of Kerala: Demographic and Socio-Economic Transition in the Twentieth Century* (New Delhi: Orient Longman Private Limited, 2006), 10.

<sup>5</sup> Zacharia, 27-8.

<sup>6</sup> The small community of Syrian Christians was strengthened by the arrival of 70 Christian families under the leadership of Thomas Cana in 345 AD. Today, these Christians that claim ancestry to Thomas Cana are known as the Knanaya. The Knanaya are sometimes referred to as the “Southists” to distinguish them from the original Syrian Christians called the “Northists.” Although they consider themselves to be an endogamous group and do not have the same Apostolic origin story, the Knanaya are part of the Syrian Christian faiths. In 1599, the Portuguese attempted to Latinize the Syrian Christians. Only a few years later in 1653, the Syrian Christians rebelled against the Latinization efforts with an oath known as the coonen kurisha, or “crooked cross oath.” This act, however, split the once united Syrian Christians into two groups, the puthankutukar or “new Christians” and pazhaykuttukar or “old Christians” who remained an Eastern rite of Catholicism. Today, the “old Christians” are known as the Syro-Malabar Catholics and the “new Christians” are conglomerately called “Syrian Orthodox” or “Jakoba”—so named because after 1665, they began to follow the teachings of Jacobus Zanzalus (S. Zacharia, 59). In 1869 due to Anglican Church influence, a small group preached reform within the Jakoba and

My analysis particularly touches on recent changes to the Syro-Malabar Catholic faith with the widely popular Charismatic movement in Kerala. With a focus on prayer and spiritual renewal, the Charismatic movement marks a shift in how the Syro-Malabar Catholic community views ritual. The movement is characterized by speaking in tongues, faith healings, sermons, dynamic worship such as swaying to vibrant music and shouts of “hallelujah” during prayer and mass, and intense spiritual retreats. Most notably, the Charismatic movement is all-inclusive and anyone, regardless of religion or caste, is invited to attend Charismatic services. It has attracted millions of followers, and many Syro-Malabar Catholics regularly attend their retreats, such as the Divine Retreat Center in Potta, Kerala which boasts over ten million visitors and its own satellite television channel, Divine. The Charismatic Movement has proven to be so popular that many Non-Resident Indian Christians have established these retreat centers in the United States. In 2011 alone, Charismatic retreats catering to the Indian Christian diaspora were conducted in Washington, NJ, Seattle WA, Annandale, MN, Detroit, MI, Nutley, NJ, Dallas, TX, Santa Ana, CA, Washington DC, and Boston, MA to name a few.

It bears noting here that Charismatic Christianity should not be collapsed onto Pentecostal Christianity. Many scholarly works have combined the Charismatic Christians with the Pentecostal Christians in their analysis of Pentecostal Christianity globally. For example, in the afterward to the edited volume *Global Pentecostalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Peter Berger stated that “the two terms are essentially synonymous.”<sup>7</sup> While it is true that there are similarities between Charismatic and Pentecostal worship such as speaking in tongues and belief in the gifts from the Holy Spirit, in the case of India and especially the Syrian Christians, I believe that it is dangerous to collapse them upon one another. For many Syro-Malabar Catholics, Pentecostalism is seen as a foreign entity arriving from U.S. missionaries aiming to convert Dalits and separate from their indigenous upper-caste Apostolic traditions. As seen in the pastoral letter I quoted from at the outset of this paper, the Catholic hierarchy in Kerala has very strongly dissuaded Catholics from attending Pentecostal worship services. Many of my research participants involved in the Charismatic movement from the Syro-Malabar Catholic community speak about Pentecostal Christians with trepidation. For instance, Lucy, a Syro-Malabar Catholic woman who regularly attends

---

splintered into a separate denomination known as the “Marthoma.” In the early twentieth century, the Jakoba divided into two factions with differing hierarchal structures: those loyal to the patriarch, and those loyal to the Indian Catholicos. They are identical in liturgy, but attempts to unite these two groups have repeatedly failed. In 1926, another minority of Jakoba attempted to reunite with Rome. A separate Catholic faction was created that is Roman in doctrine and jurisdiction yet is Jakoba in rites and liturgy. This small faction is known as the Syro-Malankara Catholic rite. The Syro-Malabar Catholics, the Knanaya, the Jakoba, Marthoma and Syro-Malankara Catholics are all considered part of the Syrian Christian community in their common Apostolic tradition and in their upper-caste status.

<sup>7</sup> Peter L. Berger, afterward to *Global Pentecostalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. Robert W. Hefner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 253.

Charismatic prayer groups, told me that when Pentecostal Christians come by her door with paraphernalia, she speaks roughly to them because she is “against their brainwashing and how they preach hatred to the virgin mother, Mary.”<sup>8</sup> The Christian channel, Shalom TV, which broadcasts many Charismatic programs aimed specifically at the Syrian Christian community, is entirely separate from the Pentecostal channel in the state, Powervision. In some ways, the Syro-Malabar Catholic endorsement of the Charismatic movement can be read as a response to the rise and influence of Pentecostal churches in the state and a fear that youth are leaving the Syrian Christian churches for independent Pentecostal churches. However, Charismatic Christianity cannot be reduced to merely a response to Pentecostalism, nor can Christians be considered homogenous or “synonymous” merely because of similarity in worship. In other words, there is a tension between the two movements that needs further exploration. The impact of the Charismatic movement on Syro-Malabar Catholics is important for understanding how the community continues to distinguish itself from other casted Christians even as the Charismatic movement has seemingly helped the Syro-Malabar Church become less ritualistic and more inclusive than it was in the past.

When Swami Vivekananda visited the South Indian state of Kerala in the 1890s, he declared it “a lunatic asylum” due to the intense caste discrimination in the state. Not only was untouchability practiced in Kerala, but also unapproachability. A Dalit was not allowed within sixty-feet of a Namboodiri Brahmin. Because the original converts to Syrian Christianity reportedly came from the Brahmin castes, they too enforced unapproachability and untouchability. As my research participant, Threshamma, a ninety-five year old Syro-Malabar Catholic woman, narrated to me:

When I was young, low-castes had to get out of the way of an upper-caste. They would know to get out of the way because the upper-caste would travel with a servant. Every now and again, the servant would call out “hoi.” When I was a young girl, I would hear that. “Hoi...” and then a little while later, “hoi.” If the low-caste was on the path, he would hide off the path until the upper-caste passed. They used to get out of our way too. My mother told me that us Christians would have servants to sweep the ground before us as we walked so we would not step on any bugs. We were just like upper-caste Hindus.<sup>9</sup>

Only upper-caste Hindus converts were accepted into the Syrian Christian faiths. Low-caste Hindu converts to Christianity were not permitted to enter Syrian Christian churches, to participate in Syrian Christian religious rituals, or to intermarry. Syrian Christians used particular Aramaic names such as “Aleyamma”

<sup>8</sup> Lucy, interview by author, January 20, 2012. Unless otherwise indicated, interviews were conducted in Malayalam and translated by the author; all names have been changed.

<sup>9</sup> Threshamma, interview by author, September 9, 2007.

(Elizabeth), “Rahel” (Rachel), “Ausep” (Joseph), and “Oomen” (Thomas) that also differentiated them from other Christians. In a fascinating, albeit dated, empirical study on the caste attitudes of Syrian Christians, Ninan Koshy found that Syrian Christians continued to insist on calling non-Syrian Christians by their caste names—such as “Pulayan Christians” or “Nadar Christians.”<sup>10</sup> Further, the Syrian Christians surveyed opposed inter-dining with lower-castes stating reasons such as “they are not clean” and “they are not civilized enough to deserve such treatment.”<sup>11</sup> One of the most visually striking things that differentiated upper-caste Christians from lower-castes was women’s clothing—a sort of embodied ritualistic difference. Syro-Malabar Catholic women wore a particular white garment known as the chatta thuni, an upper-cloth covering known as the kavani, and gold hooped earrings pierced at the top of the ear known as the kunniku.<sup>12</sup> The use of white clothing, gold ornamentation and upper-cloths tied them to Kerala’s Hindu upper-castes as the Namboodiri Brahmins and upper-caste Nayers had similar clothing and ornamentation practices. Lower-castes, in contrast, wore a coarse cloth, and were at times prohibited from washing their clothes.<sup>13</sup> They were not allowed to wear gold ornaments and Dalits were forced to wear the calla malla or iron necklace.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the lower-castes and Dalit communities were prohibited from covering their breasts, which, in the nineteenth century, led to the Breast Cloth Agitation and social reform movements.<sup>15</sup> Lower-caste Christian converts, although “allowed” by the Travancore Maharani to wear Syrian Christian garments in 1826, choose to wear upper-caste Hindu clothes indicating the level of distance between upper-caste Christians and lower-caste Christians in Kerala.

In the past, prayer and worship in the Syro-Malabar faith was neither Charismatic nor individualistic, but patriarchal and hierarchical. Women had little decision-making power in the Church and have only recently been accepted members of parish councils. They were barred from learning Aramaic and spent the entire Aramaic mass quietly reciting the rosary to themselves. They were required to veil themselves especially during communion. Sermons given at mass also had a top-down flavor to them that gave more instructions than spiritual guidance. Beginning in the twentieth century, the sermon was often used as a time to read pastoral letters written by bishops and archbishops, which gave

<sup>10</sup> Ninan Koshy, *Caste in the Kerala Churches* (The Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society: Bangalore, 1968), 39.

<sup>11</sup> Koshy, 41-2.

<sup>12</sup> Sonja Thomas, “From Chattas to Churidars: Syrian Christian Religious Minorities in a Secular Indian State,” PhD diss., Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Mathew V Kurian, *The Caste Class Formation: A Case Study of Kerala* (New Delhi: BR Publishing Corporation, 1986), 13.

<sup>14</sup> TK Gangadharan, *Evolution of Kerala History and Culture* (Calicut: Calicut University Central, 2003), 293.

<sup>15</sup> R.N. Yesudas, *A People’s Revolt in Travancore: A Backward Class Movement for Social Freedom* (Trivandrum: Kerala Historical Society, 1975); Eliza Kent, *Converting Women: Gender and Protestant Christianity in Colonial South India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

congregations instructions on a variety of topics in a hierarchical way. Sometimes, these letters were overtly political. For example, during the 1945 protest against the nationalization of primary schools, Bishop James Kalacherry issued a pastoral letter to the Syro-Malabar Catholic faithful asking them to “fight with their purses and with the spiritual sword” against the changes that would affect Christian private schools.<sup>16</sup> And in 1959, when Syrian Christians protested for their minority rights in education and ousted the Communist led state ministry, pastoral letters were read in lieu of sermons. As Thomachen, a Syro-Malabar Catholic who protested in 1959, related to me: “As Catholics, we were to support our leaders. Whatever the priests said, we would listen because that’s the way in which we were taught...At mass, the priests would preach to us about the situation...There were many letters read at mass pertaining to the protest. Those letters were our inspiration.”<sup>17</sup> Similarly, prayer in Syro-Malabar Catholic households was hierarchal with the evening prayer led by the eldest in the family with the youngest saying the traditional suthi to every elder member of the family in turn. The oldest family member was designated as the server and reader of Exodus during the unique pesaha ceremony during Passover. I do not want to suggest that this hierarchal worship has entirely been abandoned. Women still veil themselves during mass and especially during communion. Many families still pray in this structured way. Also, pastoral letters read at mass in place of sermons continues, and is seen as a way for Catholic priests to instruct Syro-Malabar congregations on political matters.<sup>18</sup> However, there have been vast changes in how the community views and practices rituals especially within prayer and worship in the Charismatic movement.<sup>19</sup>

Family prayer and the top-down system, once so important in Syro-Malabar households and a feature of the Syro-Malabar Catholic mass is decreasing while we are simultaneously witnessing the massive rise in the participation of women and more horizontal forms of worship with Charismatic prayer groups (kootiyams) and spiritual retreats featuring Charismatic sermons aimed at the individual. The main participants at Charismatic retreats and services

---

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Joseph Sebastian Thekkedam, “The Catholics and the New Education Policy of the Travancore Government,” *Journal of Kerala Studies*, Vol. 26-9, (1999-2002): 128.

<sup>17</sup> Thomachen, interview by author, December 31, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> See “Pastoral Letters Tool of Catholic Church?,” *India Express*, (Feb. 3, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> These changes are arguably not rooted solely in the Charismatic movement. For instance, in postcolonial India, there was an abrupt change in sartorial choices that coincided with secular nation-building projects in India. The chatta thuni has literally become a dying tradition as only elderly Syrian Christian women who came of age prior to Indian independence are seen in the garments. The Aramaic language mass was also changed in the early 1960s to the Malayalam vernacular. Aramaic names and the use of the suffix “amma” for Christian women—Thangama, Mariamma, Claramma—were also abandoned during this time as were the distinctly Christian words for “mother,” and “father”—ammachee and appachin—now used to refer to grandparents and as blanket terms for the elderly within the community.

are women.<sup>20</sup> At one bible study I attended in January 2012, women outnumbered men three to one. Long sermons given not only by priests, but also by nuns and lay-people are also quite attractive to Syro-Malabar Charismatic retreat go-ers, marking a definite break from the importance of pastoral letters read in place of a sermon during many Syro-Malabar Catholic masses. Many women involved in the Charismatic movement reported that the sermons associated with Charismatic worship drew them to retreats and faith groups. Women viewers of Shalom TV also discussed their love for sermons. As one participant, Susan, recounted:

Women, have the most problems in the family. Kids, problems of the house, if our husbands drink or give us beatings. How can we find strength? These sermons explain the bible to us. They explain Jesus to us, and through knowing him better, we gain strength.<sup>21</sup>

The hierarchical structure of the past and monotony of old rituals are cited as the reason for the rise in the Charismatic movement and even for youth leaving the Syrian Christian traditions for independent Pentecostal churches. Take this excerpt from a 2002 story in *The Hindu* on Syrian Christians leaving their traditional churches to new independent churches.

Asked why they left their parents' Church, everyone had the same answer: they were 'disappointed and disgusted' with the 'mechanical and ritualistic' ways of these Churches. The established Churches could not quench their spiritual thirst. Church-going was just a social custom and attending church service was a mechanical process in which the priest said the prayers (sometimes in an alien language) and the half-awake congregation lip-synched or just yawned. "It (my former Church) could not offer a balm to my aching soul," one member said.<sup>22</sup>

In the same vein, many of my research participants discussed their involvement in the Charismatic movement as a move away from the rituals of the past. For instance, speaking specifically about ritual clothing, Mariamma related this to me in an interview:

When I was growing up, the priest did not give communion if he didn't think your sleeves were long enough. Do you know? Women used to wear the long sleeved chatta thuni to receive communion. And then women started to wear the sari. One sermon, I remember, the priest he didn't like the sari and said "red saris, yellow saris, why do you come in here wearing

---

<sup>20</sup> It is important to note, however, that like Charismatic movements elsewhere in the Global South, women in Kerala's Syro-Malabar Catholic Charismatic movement are not leaders, but participants. See Bernice Martin, "Tensions and Trends in Pentecostal Gender and Family Relations," in *Global Pentecostalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. Robert W. Hefner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 115-148.

<sup>21</sup> Susan, interview by author, January 9, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> K.P.M. Basheer, "Independent Churches Mushroom in the State," *The Hindu*, June 17, 2002.



this filth!” But now, no-one will tell you what to wear if you go to Charismatic prayer. All individually, we want to understand the way of Jesus, and it does not matter what you wear—sari, or chatta thuni, or churidar. Some girls now wear jeans, and there is no problem.<sup>23</sup>

However, not all ritual has been abandoned in the Charismatic movement. There is a curious rigidity around what practices continue to constitute “Christian tradition,” while other rituals are modified within Charismatic worship. As a gender scholar, it is quite clear to me where these rituals persist and get cast as “traditional”—they most often revolve around marriage, pregnancy and childbirth. These rituals, in turn, continue to tie the Syro-Malabar Catholic community to their upper-caste Hindu identity. It is to these rituals I now turn.

In order to marry within the church, both males and females must learn about the faith and receive a certificate of completion from a church. The name of this instruction is vedapadam: lessons from the vedas. This name ties the Syro-Malabar community to upper-caste Hinduism and specifically to brahmanical patriarchy. During centuries of Kerala’s “lunatic asylum” caste practices, only Brahmin males were allowed to learn from the vedas. The importance of vedapadam to Syro-Malabar Catholics in order to receive the sacrament of marriage is reflective of these patriarchal and upper-caste ideals.

The engagement ceremony of Syro-Malabar Catholics is called koodikazhcha and many brahmanical patriarchal customs remain in this ceremony. In Kerala, only the Namboodiri Brahmins and Syrian Christians were patrilineal, and only these two communities have historically practiced dowry.<sup>24</sup> Dowry is specifically referred to in the Syro-Malabar community as stridhanam, or “share.” The stridhanam is still, to this day, announced at the koodikazhcha with a lighted lamp, and a donation is given to the church which is a tenth of the agreed upon stridhanam. According to Fr. Joseph Nagaroor’s dissertation on matrimonial legislation in the Syro-Malabar church:

In comparison with the Hindu practices, we can easily notice a similarity in most of the ceremonies. The selection of the bride or bride-groom, parents’ authority, consent of the whole community, betrothal, the paraphernalia used in the ritual, marriage ceremony, the feast and fast attached, the communitarian spirit, etc. are explicit examples of the cultural adaption of the Malabar Church.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Mariamma, interview in English and Malayalam by author, June 23, 2013.

<sup>24</sup> See Anna Lindberg, “The Historical Roots of Dowry in Contemporary Kerala,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 37:1 (January 2014): 22-42.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Nagaroor, *The Historical Development of the Matrimonial Legislation of the Malabar Church* Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studioru,(1971), 119-120.

The links to upper-caste Hinduism here is profound—not just by the fact that Namboodiri Brahmins historically practiced dowry, but also, the fire as witness and the obligatory donation to the temple customary in Hindu ceremonies.

The excerpt from the pastoral letter at the outset of this paper particularly mentioned the tying of the marriage thread as a ritual to be defended within the Syro-Malabar faith. The tying of Syro-Malabar thali, or minnu, is still the most important part of the Syro-Malabar Catholic marriage ceremony and is steeped in ritual. During the ceremony, the priest puts minnu around the bride's neck, while groom ties the minnu. If the minnu falls or is dropped, it is considered extremely inauspicious for the marriage. The veiling of the manthrakodi follows the tying of the minnu. The manthrakodi is a sari gifted to the bride from the groom's family. The priest blesses the manthrakodi, while the groom drapes it over the bride's head. The thread used to tie the minnu is taken from the manthrakodi. Both the thali and the gifting of a sari from the groom's family is part of Hindu marriage rituals. After marriage, the bride enters her husband's house with a lighted lamp, stepping over the threshold with the right foot, again as per the Hindu custom.

Another aspect of ritual that is fiercely held onto as “tradition” are practices that center on pregnancy and childbirth—rituals that Susan Visvanathan in her book on the Jakoba has described as having ritual substances of the Hindu community.<sup>26</sup> Ayurveda during pregnancy is one of the most important rituals for Syro-Malabar Catholic women. Throughout the pregnancy, the pregnant woman is rubbed with ayurvedic oils. Women take baths in water boiled with turmeric. The newborn too is rubbed with turmeric and given a mixture of gold and honey. This ritual is supposed to ensure that the child will have fair skin. In my larger work, I look at the Aryan racial claims of the Syro-Malabar Catholics that further tie them to the Hindu Namboodiri Brahmin community of Kerala.<sup>27</sup> The desire for fair skin is not only an element of beauty, but concretely ties the community to the reported Aryaness of Kerala's Namboodiri Brahmins. It is, in other words, a marker of caste that separates upper-classes from laboring Dravidian agricultural workers. As Visvanathan explains about the honey and gold concoction:

Fair colour is a preoccupation with the average Syrian Christian, reflecting, perhaps, a desire to be equated with Brahmins who are conventionally perceived as fair-skinned, and from whom they believe themselves to be descended.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Susan Visvanathan, *The Christians of Kerala: History, Belief and Ritual among the Yakoba* (New Delhi: Oxford India Press, 1993).

<sup>27</sup> Sonja Thomas, “Aryan as Skin Deep: Understanding Aryan and Dravidian Racial Divides in South Asian Studies,” presented at the Association for Asian Studies Conference (Chicago, IL, March 2015). Sonja Thomas, “It Is My Fate For Being Dark’: Caste, Conversion and the Construction of Racial Difference Among Christians in South Asia,” presented at the 43rd Annual South Asian Studies Conference (Madison, WI, Oct. 16-19, 2014).

<sup>28</sup> Visvanathan, 119.

The question is, why are rituals concerning marriage and childbirth—specifically Hindu and upper-caste in nature—kept intact, while others, such as prayer and worship are considered outdated especially within the Charismatic movement?

Marriage and childbirth rituals of the Syro-Malabar faith are inherently what the feminist scholar, Uma Chakravorty has called “the ritualization of female sexuality.”<sup>29</sup> Ritualized female sexuality reproduces the brahmanical patriarchal system through endogamous marriages. While the Charismatic movement itself would welcome all castes and religions, it is through marriage and childbirth that caste, class, racial and religious hierarchies are maintained from a previous era. The illusion of endogamous marriages occurring from time immemorial solidifies the notion that the Syro-Malabar Catholic community has always been and will always be upper caste, especially in relation to lower-caste Christian converts. The tying of the ceremonial wedding thread, in other words, normalizes the upper-caste status of the Syro-Malabar Catholics as a given in present-day society. While some rituals, such as prayer and worship can be modified, it is the rituals that revolve around sexuality and childbirth that must be rigidly guarded in order for privilege to be literally reproduced. In this light, the excerpt at the outset of this paper makes more sense—the tying of the marriage thread, use of oil lamps, and protection of the Hindu religion are all intimately linked to maintaining the brahmanical patriarchal nature of the upper-caste Syrian Christianity.

While these rituals seem innocuous—there seems to be little harm in rubbing a pregnant woman with oils—it is the perpetuation of these rituals in service to brahmanical patriarchy that is of particular concern. The idea of “Christian tradition” enshrined in rituals that maintain caste and gender hierarchies affects the everyday lives of all Christian women and maintains casteism in the region that is then defended on the basis of religious tradition. These “traditions” can have a profound impact on upper-caste women’s autonomy as it normalizes dowry, endogamous marriages and economic dependence on husbands within the community while it simultaneously engenders distance from women from other Christian denominations. A recent quantitative study on mental health in Kerala suggests that women from the Syrian Christian community subscribe to a very rigid gender orthodoxy—more so than other communities in Kerala and that may contribute to a low sense of well-being for upper-caste Christian women.<sup>30</sup> The state of Kerala itself has a suicide rate that is twice the national average.<sup>31</sup> If we are committed to social and gender justice, it is important to interrogate this new face of religiosity in order to fully understand

---

<sup>29</sup> Chakravarti, 31.

<sup>30</sup> Swapna Mukhopadhyay, Jayanti Basu, and S. Irudaya Rajan, “Mental Health, Gender Ideology and Women’s Status in Kerala,” in *The Enigma of Kerala Women: A Failed Promise of Literacy*, ed. Swapna Mukhopadhyay (New Delhi: Orient Longman Press, 2007), 79.

<sup>31</sup> Jocelyn Chua, *In Pursuit of the Good Life: Aspiration and Suicide in Globalizing South India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

how certain rituals are allowed to change and be fluid, while others, especially concerning female sexuality, are enshrined as “tradition” which often restricts the parameters for women’s empowerment and may reinforce caste and patriarchal hegemonies preventing feminist solidarity across different religious- and caste-based groups.

COLBY COLLEGE  
SMTHOMAS@COLBY.EDU

## Bibliography

- “90% of Women Feel Unsafe on Kerala Roads: Study,” accessed December 1, 2014, <http://www.keralawomen.gov.in/index.php/headlines/265-90-women-feel-unsafe-on-kerala-roads-study>.
- Basheer, K.P.M. “Independent Churches Mushroom in the State.” *The Hindu*, 17 June 2002.
- Berger, Peter, L. “Afterword.” In *Global Pentecostalism in the 21st Century*. Edited by Robert W. Hefner, 251-258. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013.
- Chakravarti, Uma. *Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens*. Calcutta: Stree, 2006.
- Chua, Joceyln. *In Pursuit of the Good Life: Aspiration and Suicide in Globalizing South India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014.
- Gangadharan, T. K. *Evolution of Kerala History and Culture*. Calicut: Calicut University Central, 2003.
- Koshy, Ninan. “Caste in the Kerala Churches” *The Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society*. Bangalore, 1968.
- Kurian, Mathew V. *The Caste Class Formation: A Case Study of Kerala*. New Delhi: BR Publishing Corporation, 1986.
- Lindberg, Anna. “The Historical Roots of Dowry in Contemporary Kerala.” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 37:1 (January 2014): 22-42.
- Lucy. Interview by author. January 20, 2012.
- Mariamamma. Interview by author. June 23, 2013.
- Martin, Bernice. “Tensions and Trends in Pentecostal Gender and Family Relations” In *Global Pentecostalism in the 21st Century*. Edited by Robert W. Hefner, 115-148. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013.
- Mukhopadhyay, Swapna, Jayanti Basu and S. Irudaya Rajan. “Mental Health, Gender Ideology and Women’s Status in Kerala.” In *The Enigma of Kerala Women: A Failed Promise of Literacy*. Edited by Swapna Mukhopadhyay, 71-101. New Delhi: Orient Longman Press, 2007.
- Nagaroor, Joseph. “The Historical Development of the Matrimonial Legislation of the Malabar Church.” *Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum*. (1971): 119-120.
- National Crimes Records Bureau, accessed June 2, 2014, <http://ncrb.gov.in/>.  
 “Pastoral letter issued by the Catholic Bishops of Kerala on the newly forming sects,” translated by Dr. S. Prema. <http://kcbc.in/news-room/pastoral-letters>. Accessed October 15, 2009.
- Rahman, Shafi. “Freelancers of God: Independent Churches Mushroom Across India Attracting Foreign Funds.” *India Today*, 30 April 2011.
- Thomachen. Interview by author. December 31, 2007.

- Thomas, Sonja. "From Chattas to Churidiars: Religious Minorities in a Secular Indian State." PhD diss., Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, 2011.
- Thomas, Sonja. "Aryan as Skin Deep: Understanding Aryan and Dravidian Racial Divides in South Asian Studies." Paper presented at the Association for Asian Studies Conference, Chicago, March 2015.
- Thomas, Sonja. "'It is My Fate For Being Dark:' Caste, Conversion and the Construction of Racial Difference Among Christians in South Asia." Paper presented at the 43rd Annual South Asian Studies Conference, Madison, Wisconsin, October 16-16, 2014.
- Threshamma. Interview by author. September 9, 2007.
- Susan. Interview by author. January 9, 2013.
- Visvanathan, Susan. *The Christians of Kerala: History, Belief and Ritual among the Yakoba*. New Delhi: Oxford India Press, 1993.
- Yesudas, R.N. *A People's Revolt in Travancore: A Backward Class Movement for Social Freedom*. Trivandrum: Kerala Historical Society, 1975.
- Zacharia, K. C. *The Syrian Christians of Kerala: Demographic and Socio-Economic Transition in the Twentieth Century*. New Delhi: Orient Longman Private Limited, 2006.
- Zacharia, Skaria. *The Acts and Decrees of the Synod of Diamper, 1599*. Edamattam. Kerala: Indian Institute of Christian Studies, 1994.