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Malayalam folksongs of the Cochini, the Jewish Community of Kerala, in India and in Israel

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By examining singing traditions, the language, and content of songs performed by women of the Jewish community of Kerala (a state located at the south-western tip of India), this article hopes to retrace the history of this community, and define its place in the historical, social, religious and cultural contexts of Kerala. This study aims at shedding light on the specific identity of the cultural history of this community and its intermingling with the local Indian culture.² The linguistic, musical and performance features of the folksongs (*pattu-kal* in Malayalam, the language of Kerala) briefly mentioned in this article and which will be explored more fully in the future,³ are placed here in the specific historical and social context of Kerala in which they arose and developed. These songs have remained part of the oral

¹ This study of Malayalam women's folksongs (*pattu-kal*) from the Jewish community of Cochin, known as the Cochini, that numbers roughly 2500 living now in Israel (and about 50 living in Kerala), was conducted in Israel in the summer of 2001 thanks to a grant from the CRFJ, and the cooperation of the National Sound Archives of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the library of the Ben-Zvi Institute. This field work was followed by an additional mission conducted in Cochin, Kerala (Southern India) in September 2001 thanks to financial support to the research team "Inde Médiévale et Moderne, Textes et Contextes," a unit of the EPHE, Sorbonne, Paris. I express my gratitude to all these institutions for their invaluable support.

² My research aims at a better understanding of the history of Indian Jewish communities, particularly that of Kerala, by focusing on the linguistic elements and content of the songs, the patronage which established and perpetuated the performance and the transmission, their place in the oral traditions of Kerala and their continuity, if any, in Israel since this community has settled there.

³ This study was conducted in conjunction with an international team which includes Barbara Johnson (who has specialized in this field for more than 3 decades), anthropologist and folklorist, Ithaca College, New York; Prof. Scaria Zacharia, linguist, Head of the Malayalam Department, Kaladi Sanskrit University; Albrecht Frenz, Sanscrit specialist, University of Stuttgart (who just published a book on this subject: *In meinem Land leben verschiedene Volker, Baustein zu einem Dialog der Kulturen und Religionen*, Schwabenverlag, Germany, 2002); Edwin Seroussi, musicologist, and David Shulman, Indian specialist, both professors at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Numerous members of the Jewish community of Cochin – a list so long I cannot cite them here-- took an active part in this research which will be presented by the publication of books and articles, and a CD of the women's songs. My affiliation with the French Units Langues-Musiques-Sociétés (CNRS), and Inde Médiévale et Moderne: Textes et Contextes (EPHE) and the Groupe d'Ethnocénologie (Paris 8, MSH-Paris Nord) enables me to integrate my work into both Indian and Judeo-Indian Studies as well as into research on ethnomusicology and ethno-scenology.

patrimony, and are sung by women during family gatherings,⁴ preceding or following religious ceremonies, and various festivals. The liturgical chants drawn from the Hebrew tradition and language are mainly performed by men, but not only, as we will see later.

My contacts with the members of the Cochini community enabled me to investigate an oral tradition that is still alive today but declining. A good number of recordings archived at the National Sound Archives in Jerusalem and a few visual documents enabled me to assess the importance of such a tradition in the community and its history. The women have preserved these songs in handwritten notebooks (29 notebooks containing between 20 and 100 songs). These three sources will be the basis for a critical edition of the texts on which Professor Scaria Zacharia is working and from which I will proceed for purposes of translation and in-depth study.

In Israel, the members of the Cochini community live in the cities of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa, Moshav Aviez and Mitzilat Zion (near Jerusalem), Moshav Taoz, and Kefar Yuval in the north near Kiriat Shmona, Nevatim (where there is a synagogue that was dismantled and reconstructed from Cochin), Moshav Sharar, Noram, Kvar Oriya Moshav, Yasoda Mala, Ramat Eliyahu, Rishon le Zion, Ashdod, Rehovot, and Neot Mordechai.

The Cochini in the Historical and Social Context

The Jewish community of Kerala, known as the Cochini, differ physically, culturally, linguistically and socially from the other Jewish communities which settled in India, mainly on the West coast. The other communities are the *Bene Israel* (living in the Maharashtra and Konkan), the largest numerically. There are about ten thousand *Bene Israel*, half of whom live in Israel (S. Isenberg, 1988 and J. Roland, 1989).⁵ The smaller community which settled in Bengal and mainly in Calcutta starting in the 18th century is called *Baghdadi*. There are also the small communities of Manipur and Assam, called *Bnei-Menashe* and the community of Guntur in Andhra Pradesh, called the Telugus Jews. Most of these communities claim to be extremely ancient, and descendents of the Lost Tribes.⁶ Research on their history and specific culture remains to be done, and it would be interesting from my point of view to conduct studies from the angle of literature and songs. Let us first situate the Cochini community within the history of Kerala, an area characterized up to the 20th century by a feudal regime and a highly stratified society⁷. This should provide a better

⁴ See infra: a) Times of Performances

⁵ Isenberg, S.B. India's Bene Israel. *A Comprehensive Inquiry and Sourcebook*, Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1988, and Roland, J., *Jews in British India, Identity in a Colonial Era*, University Press of New England, 1989.

⁶ On the various communities, refer to the general work by Zetlaoui, M. *Shalom India, Histoire des communautés juives en Inde*, Paris, Imago, 2000.

⁷ See Narayanan, M.G.S., *Perumals of Kerala, Political and Social Conditions of Kerala under the Cera Perumals of Makotai (c. 800A.D. – 1124 A.D.)*, Calicut, 1996, p.xi. "The powers of tax-collection, punishment, protection of institutions etc. enjoyed by Christian, Jewish and Brahmin corporations, the first two in towns and the last in villages, reveal the beginnings of feudalism and the peculiar pattern of caste organization in Kerala."

understanding of the ways in which cultural and religious traditions were integrated, from late antiquity until their departure for Israel between 1950-1954.

1) Meeting of Cultures

The presence of the Cochini in India can be traced back to a period that is difficult to pinpoint with accuracy; namely a presence that is mentioned in Biblical texts. There were commercial ties between Jews and Kerala from the 10th century BC, at the time of King Solomon. According to Narayanan,⁸ who quotes various passages from the Old Testament and the Talmud, reference is made to dealings of Jewish merchants in the port of Muziris (modern-day Kudungallur/Cranganore in Kerala), where they apparently had regular commercial ties involving the trade of pepper and other precious commodities. Narayanan also mentions trade between the Greco-Roman world and Kerala, mentioned in Pliny, Ptolemy, and Voyage of Erythrus in the first centuries CE. At the same period of time, Tamil writings from the Literary Academy of Sangam⁹ also make reference.

Thus the arrival in India of Jewish communities took place in a series of waves, first of all in the first centuries CE, for purposes of trade expansion as mentioned above, and then since late antiquity and starting from the medieval period to escape persecution. The first waves are thought to have come from Yemen, Babylonia, Persia and Israel at the time of the destruction of the Second Temple. In the Middle Ages, many came from Spain, Portugal, Holland and other European countries where they were persecuted. In Kerala, the Jewish community primarily settled around Cochin -- hence the name Cochini -- and received a tolerant welcome, recognition, respect and even the gifts of lands from the local kings, or rajas, as is shown by inscriptions on copper plates (*shasanam*) listing princely rights, privileges,¹⁰ and protection granted by raja Bhaskara Ravi Vaman (992-1021) to Joseph Rabban, the leader of the community.

Starting in the 16th century, with the successive arrival of the Portuguese, Dutch, English and French,¹¹ a large number of Jewish families settled in Kerala. The Portuguese attempted to conquer the kingdoms of Goa and then Kerala (1500-1663): they use forced conversions and continued to massacre the Jews and destroy their businesses located at the time in Cranganore (the old port of Muziris). The Jews had to flee. They took refuge in Cochin in 1524 where the raja welcomed them and granted them lands. He provided financial support for the construction of the Paradesi synagogue (1562); certain songs¹² mention the support and the presence of

⁸ Narayanan, M.G.S., *op.cit.*, p.161 note 170.

⁹ In particular in poem 149, (*Akam*) and poem 343 (*Puram*).

¹⁰ Totaling 72, including the princely right to ride on an elephant's back, to be carried on a litter, to use the royal umbrella, to be preceded by drums and trumpets, to have the lower castes move away so as not to be polluted by their sight or touch, to hunt deer, exemption from paying taxes and the granting of all the privileges of the royal administration, etc...

¹¹ The Dutch were present in Kerala after the Portuguese from 1663 – 1795, and the English (and a small French presence in the Mahe concession) from 1795-1947, when India became independent.

¹² Reference to songs Paradesi Palli and Song of the building of Paradesi Palli, *palli* meaning synagogue in this context. These songs present archaic Malayalam forms, which suggest that they are very old.

the raja. The synagogue, which was restored in 1760-62 by Ezekiel Rahabi, can still be seen today at the end of Jew Street in Jew Town, near a Hindu temple, the Church of St. Francis and not far from a mosque, which is indicative of the great religious tolerance of the rulers and the different communities as regards each other.

One century later, in 1662, the Dutch, in a battle alongside the army of the Cochin raja and with the help of Jewish soldiers, ended the Portuguese siege; this resulted in a second massacre of the Jews, destruction of their homes, shops, and synagogues, and all the documents, books, and records which could have shed light on their history with the exception of the copper plates that had been hidden in a safe place.

In exchange for their strong military assistance to the raja of Cochin in fighting various enemies (the Portuguese, the Muslims of Mysore and the Zamorin of Calicut) the Jewish community continued to be granted titles and responsibilities. Barukh Joseph Levi, originally from Cranganore, was the first hereditary chief or *mudaliar* appointed by the raja. This term is found in the corrupt form *moliaru* in the *Evarayi* song, which may suggest that some songs date back at least to this period. The *mudaliar* was the representative of the whole Jewish community to the raja and had all authority except for political over internal questions in the community. Barukh Levi was associated with the building of the Kadavumbhagam synagogue in Cochin in 1554. His son Joseph Levi succeeded him and began the construction of the Paradesi synagogue, completed in 1568. For the 400th anniversary of the synagogue was celebrated in 1968, Indira Gandhi, then Prime Minister, was present at the opening ceremony, which is indicative of the respect given to this community established for so long in India.¹³ The hereditary title of *mudaliar* - which is only handed down in the leading families - passed on to the Castiel family, first Samuel and then his son David. The *mudaliar* also served as advisors and representatives of the kings of Cochin, even sometimes as ambassadors, in particular to the Portuguese Viceroy of Goa. They took part in the management of economic and diplomatic affairs. They were they well-known interpreters, or *tarjuman*, an Arabic word found in Malayalam, (*tarjima* meaning translation).

With the Dutch takeover, the Jewish community regained the cultural autonomy, freedom of religion and economic prosperity it had enjoyed until the arrival and persecution by the Portuguese. This situation continued under the English presence, somewhat limited in Kerala thanks to the strong determination and power of the local rajas. According to Fischel, many documents concerning this era can be found in the archives of the Dutch East India Company (DEIC) in Holland.¹⁴ It shows the many positions occupied by Jewish community members in the 18th century: trade (above all the pepper, wood, amber, coral, rice and cotton), service professions (artisans in the construction of boats and forts, and in the manufacture of gunpowder and

¹³ See the volume published on that occasion: *Commemoration Volume. Cochin Synagogue Quartercentenary Celebrations*. Kerala History Association, Cochin 15-19 Dec. 1968. The synagogue today only operates for the major holidays of Rosh Hashanah, Kippur, Simhat Torah, Passover and brings together the few remaining members of the community (about 50). The weekly Sabbath is rarely celebrated for lack of a *minyan*.

¹⁴ Fischel, W.J. The Contribution of the Cochin Jews to South Indian and Jewish Civilization, in *Commemoration Volume. Cochin Synagogue Quartercentenary Celebrations*. Kerala History Association, Cochin 15-19 Dec. 1968, p.15-64.

weapons). They were also jewelers, bankers, real estate agents, and finally landowners possessing large estates of coconut trees, rubber, and rice plantations.

In 1687, the Dutch Jew Mosse Pereira da Paiva visited Cochin and published in 1688 his *Noticias*¹⁵ in Amsterdam in which he mentions the arrival in Cochin of what today are called the White Jews from Syria, Algeria, Jerusalem, Persia (Shiraz) and Iraq. He reported that the sacred texts of the Old Testament found in the Paradesi synagogue in Cochin were brought with Jews who came from Aden and Sanaa in Yemen.

During this period, Ezekiel Rahabi (1694-1771) made a major contribution to the community, not only in the economic and diplomatic areas but also in the religious and cultural spheres. According to Fischel¹⁶ his ancestors may have come from Aleppo in Syria. His grandfather and his father David Rahabi, the richest merchants in Cochin, (who were also diplomats and bankers), settled there in 1646, and had been in the service of the raja of Cochin and the Dutch East India Company since 1664. In the diplomatic sphere, Ezekiel Rahabi contributed to reestablishing peace with the local rajas, in times of tension in 1734 and 1742 he met the raja Travancore Martanda Varma and in 1751 the Zamorin of Calicut. In 1789 Jewish traders' ships repulsed an attack by the troops of Tippu Sultan, the Moslem sovereign of the neighboring kingdom of Mysore, who tried to invade Kerala by the sea.

2) Social Fabric

Among the Cochini there are several group distinctions. They differentiate themselves as either *Malabari* or *Paradesi*, the former claiming to have settled in Malabar since antiquity (Kerala was known as the Malabar Coast) and *Paradesi* meaning 'foreigner' in Malayalam. They were also distinguished as Black Jews and White Jews, and probably referred to in this way by outside communities¹⁷ (Hindus, Christians or Muslims) and later by the Europeans. The *Malabari* trace their arrival and their settlement in Kerala to very ancient times; the *Paradesi* primarily came from Spain and Portugal, and then from Holland in the 15-16th centuries. These two groups differ in addition as to their professions and their kinship systems, each observing endogamy and the non-sharing of food. These customs¹⁸ existed in the complex *jati*¹⁹ social system in Kerala, a system that has officially (but not in yet fully

¹⁵ See *Commemoration Volume, Cochin Synagogue Quartercentenary Celebrations*. Kerala History Association, Cochin 15-19 Dec. 1968. Da Paiva mentions nine synagogues: 3 in Cochin (for 150 families), 2 in Anguikaymal (today Ernakulam, for 100 families), 1 in Parur (for 100 families) 1 in Chenamangalam (or Chenot, for 50 families) and 1 in Muttam (Madatankil, for 12 families) and 1 other on the island of Tirutur where Ezekiel Rahabi and a dozen other families are thought to have lived.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, p.25

¹⁷ I use the term 'community' here to refer to the Hindu social hierarchy, in order to avoid the term 'caste' which is often confusing. The structure of the social system is based on such complexity that it would be a mistake to restrict it to the clichés that go with the term caste, which is in fact a word derived from the Portuguese and used to designate this structure 'from the outside.'

¹⁸ Many customs, similar to the Hindu and Jewish communities which would be interesting subjects for study: the observance of certain laws of purity connected to the menstrual cycle, birth, rituals associated with bathing, dietary laws, marriage, death, etc.

¹⁹ The *jati* are a complex variant of the *varna* system, a term incorrectly translated as castes (see supra).

in practice) been abolished since India's Independence and in spite of the communist regime in Kerala.

Aside from these distinctions we also come across the terms *meyuhassim* and *meshuhararim*,²⁰ the former viewed as 'pure', i.e. with attested Jewish ancestry and not converted, whereas the latter, termed 'impure' are supposedly the progeny of mixed marriages or mothers converted to Judaism, who are also called 'manumitted slaves'. Although I must mention these distinctions, which have been in use since the 15th century to this day, and which certainly had an impact on socio-religious relationships between families, I do not agree with them as they must have originated from the heated biased debates that these distinctions, at times erroneously emphasized by travelers or outside observers, established within the community. Once again, such terms need to be understood within the local social context, and not be taken literally or from the standpoint of a limited grasp.

Lastly, the community can also be considered from the point of view of its division into eight sub-groups associated with eight synagogues²¹ that operated until the end of the 19th century. Expanses of land were property attached to these synagogues, and proportionate income was distributed to families for their services within the community. These lands, inherited as undivided property, could not be separated from these families through marriages to families of other groups. This explains the rules of marriages between the various Cochini groups (similar to rules of certain *jati-s* in Kerala), and *a fortiori*, with members of other Indian Jewish communities or any other community.

Hebrew Culture in the Hindu World: A Dual Cultural Identity

By studying the texts of the songs, their language, their content and the times when they were performed, similar elements of both the Hebrew and Hindu cultures can be found. The climate of total religious freedom and independence made the Cochin community the oldest and most productive center of Hebrew culture in India, well before the Bombay and Calcutta centers which in fact developed thanks to assistance from the members of Cochin around places and times of religious observance: the first synagogue of Bombay dates back to 1796 and the Calcutta synagogue to 1830.

Besides the ideological and economic patronage of the rajas supporting the cultural, religious and spiritual aspirations of the Jewish community, the wealthiest and most generous members among themselves contributed to their full integration

²⁰ See works by Walerstein, M.S. *The Cochini Jewish Wedding of the Malabar Community in India and in Israel. Change in Custom, Symbol an Meaning: in the Sephardi and Oriental Jewish Heritage, First International congress on the Sephardi and Oriental Jewry*, Jerusalem, Magnes Press, 1982, 529-550, and her dissertation: *Public rituals among the Jews from Cochin, India in Israel: Expressions of Ethnic Identity*; 1987, University of California, Los Angeles (unpublished thesis, Ph.D. Folklore and Jewish Studies).

²¹ Three were located in Cochin (the Kadavumbagam, Tekkumbagam and the Paradesi synagogue in Mattancherry), two (also called Kadavumbagam and Tekkumbagam) were located at Ernakulam and one at Parur, one at Chennamangalam and one in Mala. Of these eight, only the Mattancherry one remains; the others are either in ruins or used for other purposes. Two were dismantled and shipped to Israel, one was restored and rebuilt in the Israel Museum and the other in the Nevatim synagogue where it is in use for the Cochini members of this *moshav*.

into the social fabric of Kerala, making them contributors to the general cohesion and defining a relationship of reciprocity with the dominant – and numerically largest – Hindu community.²² Rahabi was one of the most famous for his open-mindedness: he supported various members of the community whether they were *malabari* or *paradesi*. He arranged for the building of the Tirutur synagogue for a dozen families near Cranganore. A song entitled *Tirthur Palli* mentioning the building of this synagogue refers to the dates 1742 and 1757 (5503 and 5518) – most probably corresponding to the beginning and the end of building – and Ezekiel Rahabi, here is described as the ‘*devoted leader of the Jews.*’

Despite the heterogeneity of the Cochini community which as of the 15th century included Jews of various ethnic and geographic backgrounds as we have seen, despite the different groups or ‘castes’ covering their various professions, all of them coalesced around the religious fundamentals: devotion and strict obedience to Biblical Judaism and to the Jewish customs and traditions, with a fairly similar liturgy with some local variants. Hebrew, taught through the Torah texts by rabbis and teachers who came especially from Yemen, then from Holland, was both spoken and written by boys and men in addition to the Malayalam language. Women and girls in the community were not prohibited from the study of Hebrew or the sacred texts – a remarkable fact given the Jewish tradition in other parts of the world. Ezekiel Rahabi had a large number of Hebrew prayer books and Bibles regularly purchased and shipped from Holland. The local compositions mentioned in the liturgy are in particular the work of Nehemiah Motta²³. These are collected in the *kola* or books containing Hebrew liturgy specific to Kerala.

According to N. Katz²⁴ the Jewish community of Cochin was ranked alongside the two highest Hindu communities, the *Brahmans*, the most knowledgeable and cultured, in charge of initiation and transmission of sacred texts and rituals, and priestly duties and the *Nayar*, landed aristocrats and warriors, through its observances of purity (bathing, food, birth and death rites) which are very important in the Hindu world. Katz makes other comparisons²⁵ with the religious and social

²² The statistics generally indicate a proportion of 60% Hindus as compared to 20% Christians and 20% Muslims; Jews only represent a tiny fraction of the population. Note that the modern-day Christians and Muslims are the descendants of the oldest communities, respectively Syrian (Knanite) and Arab (Moplah or Mappila).

²³ See Walerstein, M.S. (1987, *op. cit* pp. 155-171) for a brief presentation of this saint whose life is now shrouded in legend. According to Rabinowitz (quoted in Walerstein) Nehemiah Motta was a famous Kabbalist originally from a major center of Judaism in Yemen, but other sources claim he was from Iraq or Turkey, Morocco or Babylonia. He was the only rabbi and spiritual leader considered to be a patron saint, mediator between god and man in the Cochini community. He was recognized as such above all by the Malabari. Nehemiah (also called Namya) Motta is thought to have been born roughly between 1570 and 1580 and died in 1615, as indicated on his tomb in the Cochin cemetery. His tomb is still venerated today by the members of the Jewish community but also by Christians, Muslims and even by some Hindus who attribute yogic powers and a certain number of miracles to him.

²⁴ See Katz, Nathan & Goldberg, Ellen S., *The Last Jews of Cochin*, Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1993.

²⁵ Some of these comparisons include inheritance of priestly duties (assigned to the *Cohanim*), the system of dietary laws of *Kashrut* (when they eat outside of the home they are strict vegetarians as orthodox Brahmins always are; nevertheless the ambiguity remains because they eat meat at

beliefs and customs in Judaism, which enabled them to live in harmony with these communities without however compromising their principles and values. The Jewish community was in fact respected because it was able to preserve its already firmly-established religious and cultural identity through strict observance of multiple Biblical laws and customs related to the life cycle observed in domestic and religious rites related to birth, marriage, funerals. Without drawing hasty conclusions, its adhesion to the dual ideal of observance of the high values of the Law and the legitimate pursuit of material wealth may be compared to two (namely *dharma* and *artha*) of the *purushartha*²⁶ in Hinduism.

Aside from the strong influence of the local language and culture on the Jewish community of Kerala, its unity and identity were forged through worship, the major religious holidays celebrating the annual cycle and the life cycle, and were based on the Hebrew language and liturgy accompanying these celebrations. The holidays were an opportunity for meetings and hence for performances of group songs. The liturgical tunes were specific to the Cochini liturgy, and were influenced in particular by the Sephardi tradition according to some, or the Yemenite tradition according to others, which remains an open issue.²⁷ The tunes of women's devotional or folk songs of Kerala called generically *pattu-kal* also played a major role in the cohesiveness of the Jewish community of Cochin. In her book, Ruby Daniel, one of the matriarchs of the Cochini women (she is now over 90) and an expert in these songs, whom I met in Neot Mordechai, qualifies these songs as 'sacred.' During the visit I made with Barbara Johnson in the summer of 2001, we were very interested in witnessing the actual process of memorization of these songs. While Ruby Daniel and other women from her family (sisters, nieces, etc.) tried together to remember the tunes of the songs transcribed in the notebooks for purposes of future recordings, heated discussions arose as they were careful not to replace one melody by another for a given song.

When placing the folksongs in the largest musical and religious context of Kerala traditions, it should be recalled that the period of settlement of the Jewish community in Kerala coincided with the growth of Hindu *bhakti*²⁸ in Southern India, under the

home, which is extreme pollution in the Hindu system); strict observance of marriage laws and family purity (strict endogamy), ascetic practices (total fasting during certain religious holidays such as Kippur, etc.), processions during the holiday of Simhat Torah, wearing a jewel called a *tali* which symbolizes the marriage, long wedding ceremonies (which in the past could last 2 weeks, with a ritual bath for the future bride, application of henna, invitations from the respective families, etc), the role of the husband and wife in ceremonies where they are respectively associated with a prince, namely Joseph Rabban, and the perfect Biblical wife, etc.

²⁶ The *purushartha* or the four basic goals of human existence for the Hindus are: *dharma*, observance of the socio-cosmic order, *artha*, pursuit of wealth, *kama*, accomplishment of one's desires, and *moksha*, urge for ultimate salvation.

²⁷ See article by Spector, J. The Music of the Jews of Cochin with special reference to Shingli Tunes, in *Commemoration Volume, Cochin Synagogue Quarter Centenary Celebrations, Kerala History Association*, Cochin 15-19 Dec. 1968, p. 177-185. This article is somewhat out of date today and it is hoped that the works of E. Seroussi on Sephardi music and work in progress by M.-P. Gilbert on the Yemenite Jewish community will be able to shed light on these influences.

²⁸ The term *BHAKTI*, customarily translated in English as devotion, covers several meanings in the Hindu context. The Sanskrit root *BHAI-* indicates sharing, and *bhakti* represents both salvation, absolute deliverance from the world of contingencies, and a personal feeling, an intimate

patronage of the Perumal kings in Kerala. *Vaisnavite* and *shivaite* poets and saints, respectively the *Azhvar* and the *Nayanar*, in the footsteps of the sages, philosophers and masters of various doctrines of Brahmanism, traveled through the Tamilakam (kingdom then composed of the modern states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and the southern regions of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka) where they congregated around the earlier temples built in the 7-8th centuries. Their devotion was expressed and intensified in a variety of ways by hymns, poems, songs, dramas and philosophical debates. The mystical-religious festivities and daily and occasional ritual activities increased, requiring a large number of 'servants', in and around the temple. In the Indian aesthetic concepts as defined in *Natya Shastra*, art and artists are considered to be a high 'service' in the path of deliverance or *moksha*, and all art forms as offerings, be they votive, bringing new merits or purification for past mistakes. The *bhakti* movement played a major role in the development of devotional literature and art (theater, dance, music, poetry, painting, sculpture) in Kerala.

This mystical movement, which took root in a specific socio-cultural, religious and political context, gradually faded over the course of several centuries and then re-emerged with greater intensity in what is called the renaissance movement of the *bhakti* cult in the 15-16th centuries, a movement which then spread throughout India. In Kerala it surfaced at the same time as the arrival of the Europeans with the blossoming of artistic and literary output. Numerous poetical, musical, theatrical compositions and iconographic works inspired by devotional feelings and experiences were produced. The Sanskrit language and poetics, predominantly used in narrating the myths gradually gave way to the Indian vernacular languages and poetics, Malayalam is one shining example. Literature and theater which developed at this time were based on the principles and values of the path of *Bhakti*, described in sacred texts such as Bhagavad-Gita, as the best path to ultimate salvation or *moksha*, because it is accessible to all those who follow it sincerely, whether rich or poor, wise men or illiterates.

In all probability, the Jewish community, well-established in Kerala at the end of the 17th century, was exposed to the literary and artistic flowering in its proximity and the fervent atmosphere all around might have permeated its creativity. Its first compositions in Malayalam were contemporary or at least developed in the wake of this poetic-religious inspiration: the liturgical compositions of Nehemya Motta and a number of women's folksongs may be assigned to this period. P.M. Jussay²⁹

experience of relationship or communication with a form or aspect of the chosen God, or with the Master or the Supreme Principle or *Satchitananda* – having no (or all) shape, name, qualities. Countless classic Indian literary works, both in Sanskrit or in the vernaculars, -- poetic, epic, dramatic or hermeneutic -- are based on the edification of *bhakti*. It is a key concept in the philosophy, religion and all the arts in India, which still pervades the way of life, thought and psyche.

²⁹ See his articles: P.M.Jussay: "Keraklatile judenmare": *Mathrubhumi Azhappattippu*, 22.1.1967 (Malayalam): The Malayalam folksongs of the Cochin Jews and the light they throw on their history, customs and manners; *Indian History Congress Proceedings*, Session 39; Hyderabad, 1978; The songs of Evarayi; published in Hebrew in *Peamim: Studies in the Cultural Heritage of Oriental Jewry*, *Journal of the Ben Zvi Institute*, Jerusalem, 1982; n. 13, p. 84-95; "The wedding songs of the Cochin Jews and of the Knanite Christians of Kerala: A Study in Comparison": unpublished, *Symposium on Knanite Christians*, Diocese of Kottayam, 1985; "Jutappattukal": Samskara keralam, Oct-Dec 1994 (Malayalam); "A Jewish Settlement in Medieval Kerala", *Indian History Congress*

mentioned in an interview during my mission in Cochin in August 2001 that one of the songs written for a *brit-milah* may go back to the 18th century according to a date given, calculated on the basis of the Jewish calendar. However caution is to be observed with respect to dates in India, in particular with relation to folklore. It is frequent to find myth superimposed on reality, thereby making it difficult to clearly differentiate the two. This double influence—mystical and literary—must have been ‘contagious’ and, in my opinion, had an impact on the various communities living in Kerala, as can be seen in the folksongs of Christians and Muslims as well. Even the expression “*the path of Bhakti*” or “*bhakti margam*” is found in one of the Jewish folksongs entitled *Judarute Margam* or the ‘path of the Jews’.

Women Sing...

The status of women in Kerala, in particular among the *Nayar* groups, is similar to the status of women in both Jewish and Christian communities that were frequently in contact with the *Nayar*, because of analogous hierarchies or professions.³⁰ Jewish women thus benefited from a certain degree of social prestige, relative independence, and a good standard of education equal to that of men. On the religious level, even though their participation in rituals remained marginal, in the space reserved for them they held a complementary role in the singing of liturgical texts. On the social level, the matrilineal system or *marumakkatayam* that had been prevalent in the *Nayar* community since the reign of the Perumal (from the 9th century onward) appears to have also been in use in the Jewish, Christian and Moslem communities of Kerala.³¹

During my mission in Israel last year I was able to meet a good number of the Cochini women (many of them in Nevatim), who are now quite old, who still remember the songs learned from their mothers or aunts. The new generation born in Israel has no knowledge of the Malayalam language and the performance of these songs has almost disappeared. The only living memory hence resides in these few elderly women I met, who themselves have to at times refer to recordings³² made by Shirley Isenberg or Barbara Johnson in the 1970-80s to recollect some melodies or the words of the songs.

a) Times of Performances

Originally, the opportunities for performances were, as said earlier, during family celebrations associated with ceremonies:

Proceedings, Session 57, Madras Univ. 1996; “The Ancient Wedding Customs of the Jews of Kerala: *Indian History Congress Proceedings*, Session 58, Bangalore University, 1997.

³⁰ The *Nayar* includes, in the highest ranks, aristocracy, landowners and warriors, occupations which are also attributed to part of the Jewish community.

³¹ I refer here to the very interesting autobiographical work by Ruby Daniel, written and published with the help of Barbara Johnson: Daniel, R and Johnson, B.C.: *Ruby of Cochin, An Indian Jewish Woman Remembers*, The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia and Jerusalem, 1995 (5755).

³² The musical archives of the University of Edinburgh contain an older collection of recordings made in Cochin with these women when they were much younger by John Levy, an English ethnomusicologist. I hope to have access in the future to these archives which, if they are clear enough, will provide information on various features of the singing traditions, the linguistic aspects and the contents.

- which preceded and marked weddings, which in the past lasted as long as 2 weeks
- name- giving for newborns (akin to Hindu custom)
- brit-milah
- bar mitzvah
- before or after religious holidays and festivals such as Passover, Purim, Hanukkah,³³ Succoth, Simhat-Torah.
- related to the construction or inauguration of synagogues (when that took place, songs classified in the 'historical' songs)

Recently several song sessions were organized to preserve this waning heritage through recordings and archival documents: brought together in 1995 in Nevatim by E. Seroussi and his students, and in 2001 and 2002 (prompted by Barbara Johnson and myself) with the members of the community in Nevatim, Ramat Eliyahu, Rehovot and Kiriath Shmona. Several recording sessions at the National Sound Archives in Jerusalem were made during the summer of 2001 for purposes of preparing a CD and will continue until its issue date set for February, 2003. A short public presentation in the presence of many member of the Cochini community, happy to relate to their cultural roots, took place with the support of the Ben Zvi Institute in August 2001. Another encounter in July 2002 in Israel organized by the Cochini community, B. Johnson and S. Zacharia was a memorable event. It was followed by a workshop on the topic of folksongs in Malayalam that was held in Kerala on September 3, 2002 in the presence of several linguistics and folklore scholars. Ophira Gamliel, a Ph.D. student at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, is currently translating these songs into Hebrew. All these studies and activities concerning the folklore of this Jewish Indian community show the need for a reconstruction of identity³⁴. Performances today are above all designed to revive these songs which otherwise would fade from memory. They are held to bring together the scattered community and to rekindle some elements of their long exposure to Indian life which has nourished part of their identity.

b) Performers

These songs are part of Kerala folk traditions and are found with different themes and forms in the various Hindu, Christian, Muslim and Jewish communities. Note that here the performers are not duty-bound in the sense of a profession.³⁵ Their only patronage or support is the attentive listening of the community as a whole, and men in particular – hence the title of this article. Part of the repertoire appears to be a

³³ A video recording was made in Israel showing women together during a Hanukkah celebration: they dance in circles with very simple choreography, and clap their hands to the rhythm, while singing. These dances and these rhythms typical of Kerala are reminiscent of the *kaikuttikali* circle dances accompanied by folksongs in Malayalam by Hindu women during the festival of Onam and other festivals in Kerala.

³⁴ See article in the *Jerusalem Post* of September 20, 2002 "Pearls of Ancient Wisdom", by Shula Kopf.

³⁵ In some communities in Kerala, women's singing can be a paid occupation: it can have various functions depending on the community, the occasion, the individuals making the request...

sacred artistic offering similar to all devotional or auspicious songs in various Indian traditions – whether religious and secular, classic or popular.

The Malayalam songs are thus only performed by women, but the men who listen to them also know the songs, as was evidenced during the memorization process. The men who were present remembered the words or the tunes when the women had forgotten them. The Cochini women also take part in liturgical singing in Hebrew in the synagogue³⁶ -- as I was able to hear in the Cochin synagogue during Yom Kippur in September 2001, in particular the very active Sarah Cohen, today the eldest in Cochin, who taught a good number of young girls and young women when they lived in Kerala.

c) Media of transmission

Although solely transmitted orally, the songs are handwritten in *note books* by women in the Malayalam script. This shows their standard of education, even in a period preceding *note book literacy*³⁷. These *note books* that they themselves call *note books* should be *note books* from the *kola*, the religious hymn and prayer books. The preservation of these *note books*, -- 29 original copies were found among the women contacted for this study (they are today *note books* and preserved in the archives of the Ben Zvi Institute)—show the importance of these songs as a heritage : they were handed down from *note* to daughter. Each woman *note* the songs and added to them on *note* occasions when she learned new ones. They carried the *note books* with them whenever these occasions took place³⁸.

d) Corpus, Themes

There are more than 200 songs; but composers have not been ascertained. There is also no way of knowing whether the composers are men or women, but some songs are assigned to men. According to Jussay (1985) the songs of Jews and Christians, known as *Knanites* (Canaanites or Nestorians, the first Syrian Christians, who form a large group among the Christians of Kerala) present common linguistic and thematic elements. Some of the melodies are similar and hence may be related to the tunes of popular Hindu songs from Kerala. But the original influence cannot be determined at this point.

³⁶ Shiloah, A. *Les traditions musicales juives*, Paris, Maisonneuve & Larose, 1995 on Jewish musical traditions. See also I.Z. Idensohn, A. Herzog, H. Roten, E. Seroussi. Shiloah does not mention women's songs. In Cochin, apart from folk songs, some women also take part in the chanting of liturgy. Women from Yemen also sing during wedding ceremonies (I heard recordings archived at the National Sound Archives in Jerusalem). It would be worthwhile to explore women's musical traditions in various Jewish communities where they exist.

³⁷ Thanks to the open-mindedness of the rajass, Kerala was one of the few regions of India, and well before generalized movements to promote education, where literacy is almost 100% for both men and women.

³⁸ See articles by Johnson, Barbara: "They Carry their Notebooks with Them: Women's Vernacular Jewish Songs from Cochin South India"; translated into Hebrew for *Peamim: Studies in Oriental Jewry*, 82: 64-80, Jerusalem, Spring 2000 and "Till the Women Finish Singing: Historical Overview of Cochin Jewish Women's Malayalam Songs", *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies*, vol. 4, 2001.

Jussay classifies Jewish songs into five groups according to their themes (as for the *Knanite* songs). The themes are: historical, nuptial, biblical, devotional and miscellaneous, drawn from local folk tales stressing moral values in the local culture.

The 'historical' songs deal with the building under the patronage of the local rajas, of various synagogues such as Tekkumbakam and Kadavumbakam in Cochin, and in Ernakulam, in Mala, Tirutur and Parur.

The Biblical songs briefly narrate the major myths of biblical Judaism with, however, a local flavor. In one of them we find what could be the description of a Hindu or Christian wedding: "*in a pandal erected for the wedding there is a plate of betel leaves, bowls for santal and kumkum, sesame oil and coconut oil for the oil lamps.*" The description of the Kerala landscape, customs (for example, the fact of not touching someone you respect with your foot; tying the *tali* as a symbol of the wedding ceremony, calculation according to astrology of the most auspicious moment, or *muhurtam*, which is a common Hindu custom). There are several clues (linguistic or referential) that could suggest when these songs were composed.

The devotional songs are hymns to God, called *alam chamacha* or *alam patacha*, the Creator of the Universe; *adiperion*, the Almighty, or the First One; *alaha nayan*, the Lord *alaha nayantan tunayale*, by the Grace of God *adiperia nayan tante ekalarulale*; by the Orders of the Almighty; *onnaya nayan*, the Sole One; *vazhutaya nayan*, the Lord of Life; *tampuran numbake*, in the Presence of the Lord. *Nayan* is also the term used by the Christians, while the term *Gnayan* is often used by the Jews. The origin of these two terms according to Jussay (1985) remains unclear, and they are not used in any other community

Zionist songs can also be placed in this category. They were composed prior to the official Zionist movement: they refer to the beauty, the holiness and the prosperity of the Promised Land of Zion and reiterate the profound desire of any Jew to return. This strong faith, which motivated the *aliyah* or immigration of most of the community, accounts for the large number of songs composed on this theme, both the oldest ones as well as those composed on the occasion of the founding of the State of Israel, and after their departure from Cochin. Several songs with Zionist inspiration were written after the contacts between the Cochin Jews and the *shlichim*, messengers from Zion sent from Jerusalem, Safed, Tiberias, Hebron, etc. to collect funds and to strengthen the ties with the Jewish community all over the world, in particular in Cochin, and elsewhere in Asia. But it was only in 1901 that a direct relationship established this link to Zion through a letter from Naphtali Eliahu Rahabi- a descendent of Ezekiel Rahabi, born in 1863 – to Theodore Herzl. He proposes a sum of money from the whole Indian Jewish communities (the *Bene Israel* were a relatively poor community with the exception of the Sassoon) to support the Zionist movement. Naphtali became an authority in the history of his community. He corresponded with Jewish scholars in India and in Europe and wrote for the Jewish Chronicle in London. He also wrote the history of the Rahabi family in 1910, and reprinted collections of songs, hymns (*piyyutim*) for weddings, circumcisions, and other ceremonies of the *Minhag Shingli* (Cochin), the *Huppat Hattanim* published in Bombay in 1917, by David Yahuda Ashkenazi.

Wedding songs are not connected with the wedding ceremony itself but with the numerous rites which precede, accompany and follow it: the ritual bath, the henna

drawing, visit of the future spouses to the family, various culinary preparations, etc. The songs, which include the names of the future spouses, always mention the prince Joseph Rabban, as the model husband. One song mentions the coming of the bridegroom who is compared to the chief of the community. It is a song in praise of this prince, with reference to Joseph Rabban (or the *Mudaliar*). Here the poet reflects a society and its benefactors, but the content of the songs cannot be taken in a historical perspective.

Fischel makes an interesting point.³⁹ Not being familiar with the Malayalam language he seemed to have ignored women's songs. Yet he apparently refers to it when he states that when one analyses the literary output of the Cochin Jews, preserved in official archives or in private collections, one can distinguish a genre, texture and typology specific to them. He says that through their literary and cultural activities the leaders of the community stressed the ability of Cochin Jews to resist, their constant reference to their Jewish identity and their pride and sense of spiritual values which enabled them to defend themselves in all circumstances and insure the survival of the community as a whole. Fischel lists numerous works⁴⁰ from liturgical poetry to historical chronicles and letters. Lastly, he states that the Cochin Jews maintained a Hebrew press above all in the cities of Bombay and Calcutta from the beginning of the 19th century. Only a few books were printed (in Hebrew and Malayalam) in Cochin itself: in 1877 Joseph Daniel Cohen, a Cochini originally from Baghdad, published six small books in these two languages on the local customs, *minhag Shinkali* (*Shingli*).

e) Musical structure of the songs

An in-depth study remains to be conducted,⁴¹ but the major characteristics can be presented here. There is no musical or instrumental accompaniment to the songs. Only clapping gives the rhythm, especially in a series of songs performed for Hanukkah (see note 33 above). I was able to identify the rhythms of certain songs as

³⁹ *Op. cit.* p. 52; a free translation is given here.

⁴⁰ Purely liturgical poetry of the *piyyutim*, *pizmomim*, *slichot*, *azharot* and *halachic* compositions dealing with the laws of the Sabbath, and the holidays, kashrut and ethics. The historical chronicles in other *piyyutim* and *pizmomim* refer to the copper plates (translated into Malayalam and transliterated into Hebrew by Ezekiel Rahabi), the description of historical events, (arrival of first settlers, building of the Cranganore or Shinkali synagogues, their destruction by the Portuguese assisted by the Muslims, etc), the famous letter dated 1768 written by Ezekiel Rahabi responding in Hebrew to 11 (or 13) questions asked by the Dutch Jewish merchant and banker Tobias Boaz of the Hague. In this *Epistola Jecheskiel Rachabi ad Tobias Boaz*, the questions deal with various aspects of the Jewish community of Cochin including traditions, the division into White Jews and Black Jews, their synagogues, their relationships to the Jewish Diaspora in Europe and in Asia, finally other chronicles written in Hebrew by different visitors (18-20th centuries): respectively from Yahya b. Abraham Sharaf Halevi, in 1781, Claude Buchanan in 1808, Rabbi David b. Beth Hillel in 1829, Jacob Saphir in 1860, Shlomo Reinman in 1884, or local descendents such as Moses David b. Sarphati in 1831, and Naphtali Eliahu Rahabi descendent of Ezekiel Rahabi in 1910 and among members of the community of Cochin itself such as A.J. Simon, A.B. Salem, S.S. Koder, Hallegua in the 20th century.

⁴¹ A typology of the rhythmic and melodic musical structures could be drawn up in collaboration with ethnomusicologists, O. Tourny, F. Alvarez-Péreyre, E. Seroussi, Kavalam Narayana Panikkar and other folk music specialists—both Indian and Jewish.

being typical of Kerala-- they follow the cycles or *tala* of eight, ten or fourteen beats, found in the *vanchipattu* boat songs, the *kaikuttikali*, dances in round, etc.

The Cochini use the term *raga* (musical mode, term used for Indian classical music) in reference to the tunes, but these bear no resemblance to the *Hindustani* or *karnatic ragas* respectively of northern and southern Indian music, which took shape in the 17th century. The melodies are more akin to the folk tradition of the *pattu-kal*, or folksongs of Hindus and Christians of Kerala, in particular for their specific rhythms and tempi prevalent in percussion ensembles, akin also to the traditional *sopana* music of Kerala. It would also be useful to compare some tunes to the *pana*, or ancient Tamil and Malayali songs.

Are the melodies and rhythms, motifs, structure intervals and modes chosen in connection with the content of the songs, with the period of their composition or with the contexts of their performance? Are they more influenced by local folklore or by Hebrew songs? What is the scope for personal interpretation (probably rather limited since the songs are performed in groups)? Is this perceptible in the mode of transmission or during the creation of a song? Is the rhythm connected to the performance of dances? Can ancient influences from southern Indian music be found, and which ones in particular? Or are there influences of the music of Yemenite Jews who settled in Kerala in Late Antiquity? According to a somewhat dated analysis by Spector, an ethnomusicologist who mainly studied the liturgy⁴² there were four types of tunes in the Cochini music (which she calls Shingli tunes). Thus many questions remain unanswered.

f) Malayalam language

Research hypotheses on the lexical, syntactic and semantic, stylistic and rhetorical structures in use in the songs are being examined by the linguist Scaria Zacharia, Head of the Linguistics and Malayalam Department of Sanskrit University of Kaladi in Kerala, who works with experts on oral traditions. Some elements of the Malayalam language still spoken by the oldest Cochini, living in Israel since 1954, shed light on certain variations in the songs. It is high time to transcribe texts in collaboration with the members of the community who are still Malayalam speakers in order to collect linguistic features.

Various linguistic references⁴³ help relate the oldest songs to the medieval period, at the time of the renaissance of the Bhakti movement (see above) or even to an earlier date if one considers morphological use of archaic syntax of Malayalam and the Dravidian lexicon, in particular the use of Tamil terms – although no dates can be assigned with certainty.

⁴² Note that women received some instruction in the Torah and particularly in the *parashiot* (weekly Torah prayers which were sung to specific melodies) by a *melamed* or teacher, who came to people's homes to teach both boys and girls. These melodies could also have been included in the Malayalam song melodies.

⁴³ Several terms shared by the Hindu, Christian and Jewish communities are used, such as *tarutaikkal*, the elders, *tasiyote*, with joy, *bava*, father, (*vava* for the Jews), *mesri*, Egypt, *varughese*, religious good deed, (*varam* or *vazhuvan* for the Hindus), by the Jews there is *bareed* or *vareed* (corrupt form of *brit*), also used for circumcision, *brit mila* in Hebrew. Concerning purely linguistic features of Malayalam, I refer to personal communications from Scaria Zacharia and P.M. Jussay. I thank them here.

For example, in one of the historical songs the word *Chirikantanagar* is only used in Jewish songs to refer to the modern-day city of Kodungallur or Cranganore. This large port city had numerous quarters, each known by different names which were sometimes taken to be the name of the city itself (as found in various documents, whether commercial or literary, and even epigraphic): *Muriacod* or *Muziris* indicated the name of the quarter where the palace of the Cera ruler was located; *Tiruvanchikulam* indicated the temple quarter, *Shingli* the Jewish quarter, etc. On this topic, refer to an article by P. M. Jussay, (*Jewish Settlement in Medieval Kerala*⁴⁴) in which he mentions a palace called today Srirangapuram located between Muriacod and Tiruvanchikulam. He supposes that the palace itself was called originally Chirikandanagam, a name as well of a branch of the river Periyar. Jussay also points out that the tombstone of Sarah was found near this river opposite the Chennamangalam synagogue. He also mentions that the women's folksongs follow the pattern of liturgical poetry composed and sung by men, emphasizing both religious principles and historical chronicles. This leads us to consider that these men may have composed some of the Malayalam folksongs.

Furthermore, the songs contain words and phrases borrowed from Tamil and Sanskrit, but also from Hebrew and Aramaic, Arabic, Ladino, Portuguese and Spanish. It should be recalled, as Zacharia points out,⁴⁵ that the Jewish community, like the Muslims and the Syrian Christians (or *Nazrani*, the Arabic term used for Kerala Christians, whose liturgical language is Aramaic) were among the first to speak Malayalam in Kerala, a language which was only differentiated from Tamil in the 9-10th centuries CE. He concludes that the linguistic and literary growth of the Jewish communities must be very old, parallel to the local culture, given the high status and the respect they enjoyed. They therefore had no need to live hidden or separate from Hindu society.

Conclusion

The Malayalam Jewish folksongs of the Cochini women are part of the cultural and religious development of Kerala and the affirmation of its language and identity. Placed in the context of the surrounding fervor or *bhakti* in which Kerala and India in its entirety was plunged, for reasons which were partly political and ideological, but also under the influence of an artistic and literary explosion specific to the history of Indian art, these songs constitute an interesting field of research within the framework of Indian and Judeo-Indian studies. Many questions still remain unanswered as regards their history, their linguistic, musical and cultural specificities, and call for more in-depth studies not only of Kerala traditions but also of the different religious and cultural traditions of the other Indian Jewish communities. The study our team is currently conducting will hopefully expand in this direction. We also hope to shed light on certain features of the Hebrew tradition, so vast and diversified in its customs and beliefs. Last but not least, it should help contribute to the preservation of an oral patrimony that is both linguistic and musical – testimony to the long, peaceful and prosperous presence of Jewish communities in India.

⁴⁴ See supra, note 28.

⁴⁵ Unpublished lecture, 6th International Conference, Misgav Yerushalayim, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, June 15, 2000.

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