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Splendid Singing Birds

Jewish Women's Songs from Kerala

Barbara C. Johnson

In collaboration with Tzipporah (Venus) Lane

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Jewish Music Research Centre, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

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PREFACE

Splendid Singing Birds: Jewish Women's Songs from Kerala brings to fruition one of the longstanding projects of the Jewish Music Research Centre. Led with diligence, profound dedication and meticulous scholarship by anthropologist Barbara Johnson, professor emerita from Ithaca College, the project encompassed fieldwork carried out in three continents for over four decades. In the course of such a long process, many collaborators from both the Jewish community of Kerala in South-West India and from academic institutions in India, Israel, Germany and the USA joined Dr. Johnson in this intellectual adventure that unraveled the deepest symbolic and aesthetic layers of a song repertoire anchored in the Jewish settlement ~~in~~ on the shores of the Indian Ocean.

Tracing back its origins for at least a millennium, the Jewish community of Kerala emerged from the trading routes of antiquity linking the Land of Israel with the Indian subcontinent. In the course of the subsequent centuries, Jewish traders from almost every community, Yemenites, Portuguese, Ottomans, Ashkenazi, joined in to create a veritable kaleidoscope of traditions and languages. But the language of Kerala, Malayalam, became the lingua franca of the Kerala Jews. Inspired Jewish poets expressed their feelings in songs in Malayalam, adorning their rituals and community events. These songs, conceived and transmitted orally, were eventually written down in precious songbooks, some of which that survived the vicissitudes of time and were brought to Israel with the migration of almost the entire community to Israel, beginning in the 1950s. About three hundred songs are included in the songbooks, though not all have been recorded with their melodies.

Based on a comprehensive ethnography carried out by her and by several other scholars and collectors, coupled with a close reading of the extant songbooks, Barbara Johnson collaborated

with the Kerala Jewish singer Tzipporah Lane to complete the present publication that encompasses the vast majority of the recorded repertoire of Jewish songs in Malayalam. Akin to the main purpose of Yuval Music Series, Johnson's work offers a detailed account and analysis of a comprehensive repertoire. However, this publication is by no means the final word in the field of Malayalam Jewish songs. On the contrary, it will offer future generations of scholar a basis to expand our knowledge of this unique Indo-Jewish amalgam.

Taking advantage of the advanced digital technologies, this book is accompanied by a detailed online playlist of recordings of the songs with their variants available at our website, www.jewish-music.huji.ac.il. This unique sound repository shall inspire future ethnomusicological inquiries into the musical interrelations between the Hindu, Christian, Muslim and Jewish cultures that comprise the unique kaleidoscopic society of Kerala.

In her introduction Johnson has detailed the evolution of this project and the contributions of so many colleagues to its enrichment. I shall therefore refrain from repeating her credits with one exception. The research on Jewish Malayalam and ~~of~~ on the songs in this language is indebted to the unfailing dedication to this field by the distinguished Keralan linguist Prof. Scaria Zecharia of blessed memory. Scaria lived to see an almost final draft of this work and authorize it while also contributing an introductory essay that is published posthumously in this volume. Those of us who had the privilege of having spent time with Scaria will always remember his gentle conversation, subtle humor and remarkable scholarship.

Ophira Gamliel, who studied and collaborated with Prof. Zecharia, made notorious contributions to the study of the culture of Kerala Jews, their language and literature. Her outstanding scholarship has enriched our project on the Malayalam song repertoire and we are thankful to her too for her continuous collaboration with the JMRC.

Finally, it is my pleasant duty to thank the former administrative staff of the JMRC, Sari Salis and Tali Shach, who accompanied this project for many years before their retirement. My former students and now colleagues Feliza Bascara, Dr. Tanya Sermer and Ori Yosef contributed to the preparation of the musical transcriptions included in this book and to them I am also extremely grateful. Tal Shimshoni from Lotte gave to this book its final graphic design and he too deserves our thanks.

Edwin Seroussi

INTRODUCTION

This book is the third publication in a long-term international project to preserve and study the Malayalam-language songs of Jewish women in Kerala, South India, and of their descendants in Israel. In combining musical recordings with English translations and commentary, it complements and expands on prior publications from two decades ago. The title of this volume - *Splendid Singing Birds: Jewish Women's Songs from Kerala* - refers back to that of the first publication (*Oh, Lovely Parrot*) in celebrating the songs' many and varied musical references to birds. It also honors the generations of Kerala Jewish women who sang these songs "like nightingales," to quote an admiring remark by one community elder after a concert in Israel.

The first publication - a compact disk with a 136- page booklet - was titled *Oh, Lovely Parrot! Jewish Women's Songs from Kerala* (Johnson 2004). The CD is a sampler of forty-two song recordings from the repertoire, and the booklet includes partial English song translations by the late Dr. Scaria Zacharia, a distinguished Kerala Christian linguist and professor of Malayalam who lived and taught in Kerala, and myself, with my introduction and a brief commentary on each song. It was published by the Jewish Music Centre (JMRC) at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

The second publication was *Kārkuḻali - Yefefiah - Gorgeous! Jewish Women's Songs in Malayalam with Hebrew Translations* (Zacharia and Gamliel 2005). This intensive bilingual study of forty-one of the songs from a linguistic and literary perspective was published by the Ben-Zvi Institute at The Hebrew University and Yad Itzhak Ben-Zvi. It was written in a cooperative effort initiated by the aforementioned Dr. Zacharia.

Zacharia had begun to study these Jewish songs in the summer of 1999, when I had the privilege of working with him in Kerala and introducing him to some of the Malayalam song texts and to English translations which had already been prepared in Israel by the Kerala Jewish elder and song expert Ruby Daniel.[1] He subsequently became whole-heatedly involved in the project through several research visits to Israel, where most of the Kerala Jews have lived since

[1] Most of her translations were unpublished, though fourteen were included in her autobiography (Daniel and Johnson 1995).

their community's mass immigration in the 1950s. After meeting many of them in person, Zacharia wisely insisted that the second publication should be a bilingual book in Malayalam and Hebrew – accessible to readers in Kerala and to interested Israelis, especially those with Kerala ancestors. On the recommendation of Professor David Shulman, an outstanding Israeli Indologist, Ophira Gamliel, a graduate student of his at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, was invited to collaborate with Zacharia on the second book. They worked together intensively in Israel and in Kerala while Gamliel was first immersing herself in the study of Malayalam and Kerala culture, which then became a focus of her important ongoing scholarship.[2]

At the core of their book is Zacharia's creation of a Malayalam-language version for each of forty-one Kerala Jewish songs, using the process he described as "textualization." This method involved studying the varied written versions of each song, as they were found in the handwritten notebooks of many different women singers, to create a composite version of the song in its original language.[3] He also wrote an extensive linguistic and literary analysis of each song in Malayalam. Gamliel translated these songs into Hebrew and contributed an in-depth Hebrew language commentary for each one. Their book featured twenty-five of the songs from the *Oh, Lovely Parrot!* publication - including variants of some of them – plus an additional sixteen songs in which Zacharia was particularly interested.

This current book - the third publication on the subject - presents English translations of seventy-nine Malayalam-language Jewish songs, with a commentary on each song. It highlights the musical dimensions of our long-term project by including musical transcriptions and linked sound recordings for all the songs.

These new translations and commentaries were produced through my long-term collaboration with Tzipporah ("Venus") Lane, which began in 2003 when she helped me to edit the final English version of the *Oh, Lovely Parrot!* booklet. A close relative of Ruby Daniel,

[2] Dr. Ophira Gamliel went on to write her Ph.D. dissertation on the Malayalam Jewish songs (Gamliel 2009), along with many related articles about the songs, Kerala Jewish history, and Jewish Malayalam as a language (e.g. Gamliel 2013, 2016, 2018). She is now a faculty member at the School of Critical Studies, University of Glasgow, Scotland. See her eloquent "In Memoriam" tribute to Scaria Zacharia (Gamliel 2023).

[3] His process was similar to that used by Ruby Daniel in her earlier English translations.

Venus was born and college-educated in Kochi, where she worked as a schoolteacher and accountant before moving to Israel with her family in 1972. She became a recognized musician and song expert among Kerala Jews in Israel during the early years of the twenty-first century. Venus was one of the "nightingales" who contributed her voice to recordings for the *Oh, Lovely Parrot!* CD, and she played a key role in the revival of Malayalam Jewish song performance that followed its release. When plans were under way for this third publication, Zacharia enthusiastically gave his approval for her involvement, praising Venus for what he called her "A-plus Malayalam" and her personal knowledge of the songs.

With financial support from research grants, Venus and I were able to work together in person during the following decade, including several intensive periods in Israel and in the United States. Since then, our work together has continued online. We each have had access to copies of all the song notebooks and recordings, along with published and unpublished translations by Ruby Daniel, and notes from my early work with both Daniel and Zacharia. Following their example, our approach to translation has involved "textualization" based on all the available sources. With a minimal knowledge of Malayalam, my own focus has been on the English phraseology. Our individual copies of the thousand-page Malayalam-English dictionary (Gundert 1995) that Zacharia assigned to us have been a necessary and now well-worn resource.

Our approach has involved attention to each song's musical elements - its melody, meter, rhythm, and repetitions, as well as its written lyrics. We listened carefully to the Kerala song recordings in the NSA collection at the Hebrew University, including examples from varied Kerala communities when possible and appropriate. In a few cases, this enabled us to translate songs for which we had no written version. In some other cases, there were no recordings available for songs we wanted to include, or the only archived recordings were not clear enough to be transcribed. These were songs that Venus Lane then sang and recorded explicitly for inclusion in this book, adding to the NSA collection as well as to enhancement of this book.

Contents of this Volume

The translations of and commentaries on the entire corpus of Jewish women's songs from Kerala at the core of the book are divided into five sections, grouped in broad terms by subject matter and/or performance occasion. Most of the "songs of origin and community identity" in Section One are traditional narratives about the early arrival of Jews in Kerala and the building of their synagogues – each synagogue being central to the identity of one of their eight Jewish communities in Kerala.

The songs in Section Two are varied in genre and grouped together according to the special occasions in which they were traditionally performed. Some are multi-purpose songs of blessing that could be adapted for specific events in the Jewish community. The largest number are songs of varied genres for the celebration of Kerala Jewish weddings – celebrations that traditionally lasted for many days.

Section Three is a collection of biblical songs, mostly narratives that are based on the Hebrew Bible. Many of these songs are drawn from the Midrash, the vast collection of post-Biblical Hebrew commentaries on the Bible that are based on a mode of biblical interpretation prominent in the Talmudic literature. These songs also include the retelling of biblical stories stemming from the narrative sections of the Bible. Section Four is a smaller group of devotional songs that do not fit neatly into the previous categories. Section Five is a collection of Zionist songs from the twentieth century, leading up to the 1950s emigration of almost all the Kerala Jews to the newly created State of Israel.

The commentaries following each song translation are informed by Venus Lane's lifetime of personal experience as a Jew from Kerala and by my anthropological training and fifty years of research on Kerala Jewish history and culture. In commenting on the biblical songs in Section Three, I followed the lead of their earliest translator, Ruby Daniel. When she and I worked together on translations between 1983 and 1996, she often consulted the Bible in addition to many different handwritten song notebooks; and she also told me related stories from the Midrash and the Talmud that she had heard from her learned grandfather and other elders who studied the Hebrew volumes kept on the bookshelves owned by wealthier families in the

Jewish community.[4] I have also consulted Louis Ginzberg's seven-volume *Legends of the Jews* (1967-69) to locate biblical legends from the Mishnah, the Talmud and the Midrash (*aggadah*) that served as sources for many of the songs in Section Three.

In addition to relevant information about Kerala Jewish history and the synagogues in the area, our commentaries note elements of Kerala's culture and landscape that pervade the song collection: references to the sea and the landing-places, the birds and the flowers and fragrances, festive dress with elaborate jewelry and gold ornaments, prosaic measures of distance, and Indian musical instruments. For example, in the Malayalam rendering of one Hebrew song (song 36), the "Woman Dwelling in a Field" lives in an Indian-style rice paddy field located between Mount Carmel and the Golan Heights in Israel. In one of the biblical songs (song 44), the patriarch Jacob is carried to Egypt in splendor and honor by means of an Indian-style bullock cart, and in song 54 young David is saved from Goliath by a mosquito, perhaps the most irritating creature in all the wildlife of Kerala.

Beyond our translations and commentaries, the book features a previously unpublished essay by Scaria Zacharia. He completed it in 2017 specifically for inclusion in this book, offering his uniquely valuable perspective on the songs as a linguist, "in the context of Kerala culture, Malayalam literature and folklore."

Kerala, the Jewish Women, and their Songs

Jews have lived for over a thousand years on the tropical Malabar coast of southwestern India in what is now the state of Kerala, speaking the Malayalam language of the region. It is likely that the earliest Jewish settlers in Kerala arrived as merchants, traveling the early Indian Ocean trade routes connecting the Mediterranean and West Asia with India.[5] Like some early Christian and Muslim traders, these Jews would have settled down, married, and made converts

[4] Daniel and Johnson (1995, 27). Daniel and Johnson 1996 is an unpublished collection of thirty-one songs with biblical themes. See Johnson 2006 for discussion of intertextuality in Ruby Daniel's interpretation of the biblical songs.

[5] See Malekandathil 2022, Gamliel 2018, and Chakravarthy 2007 for discussion of Jewish involvement in these early trade connections.

of local residents, forming communities that became integral to the fabric of Kerala's diverse culture.

Jews were by far the smallest ethnoreligious group in Kerala, sharing a relatively high status along with the larger Muslim and Christian minorities dwelling among a predominately Hindu population. [6] Kerala Christians include an ancient community of Syrian or "St. Thomas Christians" who claim descent from the disciples of St. Thomas, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus who, according to some traditions reached the coast of Kerala around 52 CE. Other Keralan Christian communities consist of Roman Catholic and Protestant groups that emerged during the periods of Portuguese, Dutch and British colonial rule in Kerala through the efforts of missionaries. These ethnoreligious minorities enjoyed freedom to maintain their faith during centuries of Hindu rule, as well as under Dutch and British colonial governments, and finally within the democratic Republic of India after its creation in 1947.[7]

Over the centuries, Kerala Jews had some contact with two other Indian Jewish communities. The older group of the two were the Marathi-speaking Jews known as the Bene Israel community who lived many hundreds of miles to the north, in villages along the Konkan coast. Many of the Bene Israel eventually moved to Mumbai (then called Bombay) when that city grew into a large metropolis under British colonial rule in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. There were also Kerala Jews who moved to Bombay for work, some to serve as Hebrew teachers or prayer leaders in Bene Israel synagogues.

The British colonial period (1757-1947) was also marked by an influx to Mumbai and Kolkata (then Calcutta) of Jewish merchant families from diverse areas dominated by or under the influence of the British Empire, such as Iraq, Syria, the port of Aden in the Southern Arabian Peninsula, Persia and Yemen. Notable among these new waves of Jewish immigrants were the "Baghdadi Jews" who acquired a prominent social position during the British colonial period due

[6] As of the latest census, Kerala's population was 54.73% Hindu, 26.56% Muslim and 18.38% Christian. (https://www.census2011.co.in/data/religion/state/32-kerala.htm)

[7] During the period of Portuguese colonial rule (1498-1663) the Kerala Jews were largely protected by the Hindu rajas of the small kingdom of Cochin, who shielded them from the persecution that Jews experienced in many other Portuguese colonies.

to their prominent role in the South-East Asian international trade.[8] Some members of these newly formed Jewish communities in India maintained close contacts with the Jews of Kerala

In Kerala, Jews lived in eight separate but inter-related communities, around synagogues located within a twenty-five-mile radius of each other. Three of the synagogues were on "Jew Street" in the island city of Kochi (formerly Cochin) and two across the harbor in the larger mainland city of Ernakulam. The three others, connected by inland waterways, were in the smaller towns of Chendamangalam, Parur and Mala. The members of each synagogue had a proud sense of community identity, with its own building for worship and an independent socio-political governing system called a *yogam.* Six of their synagogue buildings are described and celebrated by songs in Section I of this book (songs 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10).

Despite some differences, there was active social contact among all eight of the Kerala communities, in the form of friendships, neighborly assistance, attendance at each other's celebrations, and the widespread sharing of Hebrew and Malayalam songs. Marriages took place among members of the seven oldest communities, with each bride becoming a member of her husband's *yogam* and taking her family's songs with her into that community.[9] In discussing individual songs, we considered what is known about their community origins and the variants that developed in the course of time.

A mass migration of Kerala Jews to Israel began in the 1950s, inspired by Zionist idealism along with personal and economic factors and a strong sense of collective loyalty to their relatives and neighbors, along with their shared history and culture. Only a few Jews remain in Kerala today, but more than 8,000 descendants of this ancient Indian Jewish community now

[8] See Isenberg (1988), Roland (1989) and Kowner (2023) for detailed studies of the diverse Jewish communities in India. For the "Baghdadi Jews," see the collective essays included in Weil (2019). For their musical traditions, see Manasseh (2012)

[9] The one exception in terms of intermarriage was the more recently established Paradesi community in Kochi, whose members usually married each other or sometimes Jews from outside Kerala. "Paradesi" is a Malayalam word for "foreigner," and its members traced their ancestry to more recent Jewish immigrants to India." According to a seventeenth century report by a visitor to Kochi, this newer community included Jews descending from Spain, Germany, Persia, Aleppo, Damascus, Jerusalem and Constantinople. (Pereyra de Paiva 1687).

live in Israel, where they are referred to in Hebrew and English (by themselves and others) as "Kochinim" (sing. "Kochini").[10]

Malayalam – one of the Dravidian languages of southern India - was the mother tongue of Kerala Jews, like most of the other residents of the region. At home and among themselves, Jews used elements of an old dialect of Malayalam that linguists have recently labeled Jewish Malayalam (Gamliel 2013, 2016), though they also spoke the standard Malayalam characteristic of their region.

In addition, many if not almost all Kerala Jews were well acquainted with Hebrew, the Jewish language of worship and religious affairs (such as rabbinical responsa). Synagogue ritual was conducted in Hebrew, led by designated male prayer leaders who were trained in the liturgical order and in the musical style that had developed as a Kerala version of the so-called "minhag Sefardi" ("Sephardic custom").[11]

In contrast to many other traditional Jewish communities, Kerala Jewish women regularly attended services in the synagogue, especially on the sabbath and major Jewish holidays. I have been told that most could read Hebrew and follow the service in their prayer books, as could most of the men. In a charming video created by Tovah Aharoni from the Parur Jewish community, a Kochini grandmother is shown telling Israeli grandchildren how she learned Hebrew in India when she was a child. (Aharoni 2013b)[12] Ruby Daniel, born in 1912, remembered her early Hebrew school classes in Kochi, where girls and boys together learned to read the weekly Torah portion in Hebrew along with its Malayalam translation. (Daniel and Johnson 1985, 40)

Women's literacy among the Kerala Jews should be viewed in the larger historical context of Kerala itself, a region of India unique in its emphasis on literacy in general and in the

[10] This Hebrew term was derived from the English label "Cochin Jews," which was applied to them by outsiders because seven of their eight communities were in the princely state or kingdom of Cochin.

[11] In contrast to the Ashkenazi liturgy practiced in Eastern, Central and Western Europe, the Sephardic liturgy consolidated in medieval Spain and was adopted with local variants by Jewish communities in North Africa, the Middle East, Southeastern Europe and India. Ethnomusicologist Johanna Spector (1984-1985) identified Sephardic-Portuguese, Baghdadi and Yemenite musical elements in Kerala Jewish liturgical music.

[12] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FXvv8tqrf8U#t=1

relatively high social position of its women. This phenomenon is especially noticeable within the matrilineal structure of several Hindu upper castes who served in some ways as a cultural model for their Jewish neighbors.[13] Kerala State has the highest literacy rate in India today: 94 %, compared to 74.04 % for India as a whole.[14]

Likewise, in contrast to many other traditional Jewish communities, Kerala Jewish women were not prohibited from singing aloud in the presence of men. Women and men did sit separately in the synagogue, but by a unique feature in Kerala synagogue architecture, the women's section (on the second floor of the building's entrance hall) was connected directly with the spacious sanctuary. This upstairs women's space opened onto the balcony pulpit (*tevah*) from where the Torah scrolls are read aloud. Concealed from the sanctuary only by an open lattice partition, the women could thus see and hear the services and could also be heard from throughout the sanctuary – singing and praying in full voice along with the men.[15]

At home the men, women and children would sing Hebrew sacred songs together after meals on Shabbat, Jewish holidays, and special ritual occasions such as circumcisions. In addition to owning their own Hebrew prayer books for services in the synagogue, many families would also own a copy of the Hebrew book they call "*kolas.*" This is an anthology, compiled in Kerala, of songs, prayers, and other Hebrew readings, many of them designated for particular Jewish holidays or other ritual occasions.[16] It contains *piyyutim* (paraliturgical songs) shared with Sephardic and other Middle Eastern Jews throughout the world as well as some that were composed in Kerala by local poets following Sephardic models. Women would especially enjoy singing *bakkashot*, Hebrew songs of seeking included at the beginning of their *siddur*, the book

[13] See Jeffrey (2010,112-146), for a compelling analysis of "How Women Made Kerala Literate."

[14] https://www.census2011.co.in/facts/highstateliteracy.html

[15] For discussion and illustration of this unique synagogue architecture, see the commentary following songs 8 and 9 in this book, and the descriptions and photos in Eliyahu-Oron and Johnson 2021, 123-124, 129, 152-153.

[16] Early versions of this Hebrew collection were compiled by Kerala Jews and printed for them in Europe and Bombay (Fischel 1971, 48-57), and several newer versions have been published in Israel. The version cited in this volume is *'Areshet* 1981, published by a Kochini synagogue in Ashdod, Israel. We have not been able to find a derivation of the term *kolas*.

of daily prayers.[17] Many melodies from these Hebrew songs have made their way into the Malayalam Jewish songs.

Though men and women sang together in Hebrew, it was the women who were performers and custodians of the Malayalam-language Jewish songs. They sang these songs, without instrumental accompaniment, at home and at public gatherings for festive occasions, with men listening respectfully as the women sang.[18] As Ruby Daniel recalled:

> For [some] parties the men and women would all sit at the table… The men know the Malayalam songs by hearing them, but the women are the ones who sing them. Till the women finish singing, no one will get up from the table. (Daniel and Johnson 1995, 174,175)

The Song Notebooks, Recordings, and a Song Revival in Israel

Women singers traditionally preserved the Malayalam lyrics of their songs in handwritten notebooks, which they treasured and passed on from generation to generation. These song notebooks contain no form of musical notation and yield almost no information about their authors. Some but not all songs have titles, and some have marginal notes indicating if they are associated with the melody of a certain Hebrew song or with particular performance occasions. A few of the notebooks are identified as handwritten by men.

During the 1970s, fellow anthropologist Shirley Isenberg (1918 -2000) and I discovered the importance of these women's notebooks when we began a shared project of recording the songs – Shirley meeting with Kochini women in Israel and I travelling from the U.S. to Kerala, where there were still some Jews living in Kochi and Ernakulam. Many of the women who performed for our recordings sang while reading from their song notebooks. Some lent us the

[17] The prayer book cited as *Sefer Tefilat haHodesh* in this book is the one used by Venus Lane's family and many others in Kochi.

[18] There was no prohibition of men singing the Malayalam songs, and some men would join in spontaneously on informal occasions.

notebooks to be photocopied, and a few even donated old notebooks that were no longer being used.

These encounters marked the beginning of a collection of Malayalam song notebooks, now archived in the Library of the Ben-Zvi Institute for the Study of Jewish Communities in the East located in Jerusalem and available to researchers. This precious collection contains about thirty-eight notebooks (original or copied), from which more than three hundred different song texts have been identified and indexed.

The index was created with a third member of our unofficial research team, Professor P.M. Jussay (1919-2007) a Kerala Christian who taught English at the Calicut Regional Engineering College. Having grown up with Jewish neighbors in the village of Chendamangalam, he was interested in Kerala Jewish history and curious about one of their song notebooks, which had been given to him by a friend. Learning of Isenberg's research on the Bene Israel Jews of India, Jussay wrote to her in Israel, suggesting that she contact some of the Kerala Jews there and try to record their Malayalam songs. She wrote to me about his interest, and thus began our three-way collaboration by mail, which culminated with Jussay spending six months of 1981 in Israel while I was there, also doing research on the community.[19]

In the cross-index that Jussay created with our input, each Malayalam song was assigned an index number according to its literary content and performance occasion, if known. Though these categories were defined by outsiders, rather than by the performers who actually knew the songs, the index was useful for identifying and comparing song variants, as more notebooks were being located. The index number of each song is provided in this book, along with information about the singer or singers and the date and place of the recording.

All the early song recordings from the 1970s and 1980s were also indexed and deposited in the National Sound Archive (NSA) of the Jewish National and University Library of Israel

[19] Jussay would go on to publish academic and popular articles in English and Malayalam on Kerala Jewish history, including a few song translations. See Jussay 1986a for his article about the Jewish women's songs published in English and Hebrew, and Jussay 2005 for a collection of his other articles. After retirement from teaching, he was the chief editor of *The Kerala Times Daily* in Ernakulam.

(JNUL, today the National Library of Israel), along with a few more recordings from the 1990s. There the recordings would serve as a basic source for the "Oh, Lovely Parrot!" booklet and CD.

In 2001, when plans were being made for the compact disk, it was decided to invite several contemporary Kochini-Israeli singers to record additional songs at the NSA studio. This small group included Ruby Daniel's sister Rahel Kala, their cousin's daughter Venus Lane, and three others. Almost half of the songs on the CD came from their new recordings.

Galia Hacco, one of the new singers who had recorded songs for that CD, was inspired by their collaboration in the recording studio to organize a performance group called the Nirit Group Singers. The original group of five was expanded to include altogether thirteen Israeli women who had been born and brought up speaking Malayalam in Kochi, Ernakulam, Parur or Chendamangalam. Developing a song repertoire, they performed for Kochini events and for wider Israeli audiences, including the Hebrew University, the Van Leer Institute and the Indian Embassy.

Tovah Aharoni, another talented Kochini singer, organized a women's singing group in Moshav Mesillat Tzion, where they met regularly to learn and practice songs. The Nirit Singers eventually produced their own compact disk and booklet with a selection of Malayalam songs, including Venus Lane's Hebrew transliterations of the lyrics. (Hacco 2008) Singers in Moshav Nevatim joined with the Nirit Singer and the Mesillat Tzion group for a celebratory song event. (Aharoni 2014)

Meanwhile, interest in the Malayalam Jewish songs was also flowering in Kerala. In 2006 Zacharia organized an ambitious and well-attended international conference on "The Jewish Heritage of Kerala," where the Malayalam and Hebrew book he had just published with Gamliel was introduced, along with the 2004 CD and booklet. Interested scholars from Kerala, Israel and the U.S. shared this opportunity to meet and learn from each other as we presented research papers, listened to musical performances, visited historic Jewish sites, and engaged in enthusiastic conversation. Many of the conference papers were included in a special edition of the new journal *TAPASAM: A Quarterly Journal for Kerala Studies*, Vol. 1 (3).

Song Composition and Performance

Only a few individuals, all men, who have been identified as authors of songs in Malayalam are named in the notebooks or were mentioned in comments made by the singers. Most notable is Isaac Moshe Roby (1876-1955), called "Kakicha" – notable because his nickname is still associated with the popular Zionist song 71, "Our Ancient Hope," also called "Kakicha's Song." Another author is Ruby Daniel's grandfather Eliyahu Japheth (1850-1935); according to Ruby and other family members he authored songs 52, 67 and 72. Another named author is a young man named Siyon Vadakamuttu of Parur, whom singer Rivka Yehoshua remembered many years later as the person who wrote the lyrics to song 74, "The Fifth of Iyyar," to be performed by herself and a group of other girls for the celebration of Israeli Independence Day in India.

Though we do not know whether Kakicha or grandfather Japheth created the music as well as the lyrics of the two older songs, we do know that young Vadakamuttu set his lyrics to the melody of a popular 1949 Indian cinema tune. In doing so, he was following the musical practice known as contrafactum, discussed below. But who authored the rest of the songs?

Scaria Zacharia suggests that the Jewish women singers themselves could be regarded as authors, during their process of rehearsing together and also while performing their Malayalam songs. In his article for this book, he formulates a literary and linguistic analysis of these Jewish women's songs as "true folk songs," which "continue to change as part of the folk process." The songs were developed "at the interface of orality and literacy," he explains – orality referring to their performance by the women and literacy referring to their preservation in the notebooks.

Describing the Kochini women's rehearsals for public song performance, which he had observed during his time in Israel, Zacharia writes that he had watched the singers "sorting out their differences … through a give and take policy. It was a management principle of convergence that facilitated the evolution of the text." Here he is referring to a traditional aspect of Kochini women's song performance - the necessity of practicing as a group before performing for others. I encountered this performance tradition myself in 1977, at the beginning of my experience recording the Jewish songs in Kerala, when Sarah Cohen was introduced to me in Kochi as an expert in the songs. In the context of being asked by a researcher from outside the

community to sing into a microphone, she let me know that she preferred to sing with her next-door neighbor, and that they would need to practice before being recorded. Most of the songs she recorded for me that month were performed with her neighbor Ruby Hallegua and/or other friends, who prepared with rehearsals in advance.[20]

Within each of the eight Kerala communities, women used to come together, bringing their individual notebooks and led by a woman they acknowledged as a song expert, to compare variants of a song and agree on a common version to perform. This custom can be interpreted as a precursor of the textualization process developed by Ruby Daniel and then Scaria Zacharia himself, in their translation of song lyrics from Malayalam to English.

The local "experts" who had led the practice sessions in Kerala were older women, some named and remembered with respect by later generations in Israel.[21] In addition to organizing the rehearsals in her own Jewish community, a song leader was the one expected to begin the singing of a song and perhaps indicate a repetition or change of melody during its performance. Some fifty years later in Israel, when Zacharia observed a rehearsal of the Nirit Group Singers, a new version of that traditional role had been taken on by Galia Hacco, its organizer and leader. Most of the participants in that group were retirees who had left India as teenagers, coming from different Kerala Jewish communities, currently living in different places in Israel. Some had sung a few of these Malayalam songs at home, and several had inherited family notebooks. Some (including Galia) were learning many songs for the first time – from friends and relatives or from each other. As a group, they were engaged in what Zacharia observed and described as a form of folk "composition."

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[20] This preference was also reflected in recordings by Isenberg and Gerson-Kiwi from Kerala Jewish communities in Israel. A review of the seventy-nine songs in this book confirms the tradition, showing that fewer than half were sung and recorded as solos, and ten of those solos were recorded by Venus Lane so that we could include previously unrecorded songs in the collection. A similar performance tradition among women singers in the Knanaya community of Kerala Christians was reported by Richard Swiderski. When studying their Malayalam songs he found, "It is difficult to persuade them to sing alone. Women asked to sing will summon a friend or relative to join them." (Swiderski 1988b:134)

[21] It was Sarah Cohen in Kochi who told me that Dolly Japheth, daughter of the author Eliyahu Japheth, used to be the song leader for the Kochi-Paradesi community. She encouraged me to contact Dolly in Israel, and that contact led to the involvement of Dolly's niece Ruby Daniel in the collective research project.

Melody Sources

Although we lack evidence about songs that may have been composed "whole" - both lyrics and melodies together - we do have considerable knowledge of melodic intertextuality, or melodies shared with another source. One aspect of the composition process included the use of "borrowed" or shared melodies to perform the written text or lyrics of a song. For almost half the songs in this book we can identify a melody or melodies shared with another source, as represented in its musical transcriptions and linked recordings.

The most commonly "borrowed" melodies are those from Kochini Hebrew songs. Melodies or fragments of Hebrew *piyyutim* (paraliturgical songs) are scattered throughout at least twenty-six of the Malayalam songs in this book, for example in blessing songs for life-style events (songs 19, 22, 24), synagogue songs (5,7) and biblical narratives (songs 16c, 20, 44, 58). Others are apparent in the songs that are Malayalam translations or close adaptations of devotional hymns (songs 61, 62, 64, 65). The widespread sharing of these melodies illustrates Kerala Jewish women's thorough familiarity with the melodies of Hebrew paraliturgical songs and highlights the interweaving of the women's performance of Malayalam songs with the shared male/female singing of Hebrew songs.

Whereas some of these Hebrew *piyyutim* may be unique to Kerala (Fischel 1970-71), others came from far away. As suggested by Seroussi (2000), some originated in medieval Iberia and the early modern Ottoman Empire and were transmitted to Kerala in manuscripts brought in by Sephardic learned men, merchants and immigrants who settled in the region. Others might have been learned from sporadic Jewish visitors to Kerala, and others during the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century residence of some Kerala Jews in Bombay and Calcutta, where they had musical contact with more recent "Baghdadi" Jewish immigrants from the Middle East. Although some of the Kerala *piyyutim* might carry old non-Jewish Arabic, Judeo-Spanish or Turkish tunes, they were certainly perceived by Kerala Jews as thoroughly Jewish by the time they were adapted into Malayalam song melodies.

With the mass immigration from Kerala to Israel many women left behind their Malayalam song notebooks. Yet, many if not most families did bring along with them one or

more printed Hebrew books. In addition to prayer books with the order of liturgy for synagogue services, some also owned a copy of the Hebrew "*kolas*" printed in India.

Eventually new editions of these Hebrew anthologies from India were printed in Israel. The one cited in this book to identify Hebrew songs is *Areshet Sefatenu* ("The Expression of Our Lips" after the opening line of an ancient *piyyut*, customary in the Ashkenazi tradition, for the Mussaf service of Rosh Hashanah), published by a Kochini synagogue in Rishon LeZion and cited here as *Areshet*1981. To identify Hebrew devotional songs called *bakkashot* (which are not found in the "*kolas*," but which Kochini women have traditionally enjoyed singing in the morning), we also cite from a Sephardic *siddur* containing these poems that Venus Lane's family brought from Kerala, cited here as *Sefer Tefilat haHodesh* 1931.

As for other melody sources in the repertoire, some folk-style tunes have been described in general terms as "similar" to Kerala folk genres and two of the melodies are based on identified Kerala folk songs (songs 14 and 15). Two melodies seem to be associated with a traditional type of Kerala Christian drama (songs 58, 59). The melodies of several Zionist songs have been borrowed from popular Indian cinema or political songs of the late 1940s and early 1950s (songs 74, 75, 78,79), and one Zionist song melody comes from a Bengali song by way of Burma (song 70).

In the case of some songs, it seems evident that their melodies have been borrowed or adapted through the practice of contrafactum - composing a new text to fit an existing tune of another song. In other cases, it is known that the process involved finding an existing melody to fit a particular text.

According to the strictest usage, contrafactum involves not only using the melody, rhymes and metric scheme of a "model" song but also imitating the sounds of the original language of the adopted song and at times also images from its literary content (Kligman 2009,16; Seroussi and Weich Shahak 1990/1). Kligman and Shelemay (1998) also discuss contrafactum as the major method by which modern Syrian Jews, following a well-entrenched Sephardic practice, still compose new *piyyutim*, fitting them to the melodies, modal scale system (*maqam*) and performance aesthetics of Arabic songs.

Among the seven Malayalam songs that are quite faithful translations of Hebrew *piyyutim*, "Each and Every Day" (song 66) presents a double example of the contrafactum process, as its Hebrew *piyyut* melody was itself borrowed from a non-Jewish source, discussed in our commentary on that song. Some of the Malayalam song translations from the Hebrew are more flexible adaptations from Hebrew texts, and others simply echo the themes or occasions of related Hebrew songs.

Among the songs composed to tunes from popular Indian political or cinema songs, just two – songs 75 and 79 - show an obvious echoing of content, in phrases or themes, while songs 70 and 74 are amusing in the incongruity between their themes and those associated with the origin melodies.

In the presence of an already existing song text for which the melody is not known or remembered, one Kochini response has been to ask someone to "tune" the song - in Malayalam, "give a *rāga* (melody) to the *pāṭṭu* (song)." This request would be addressed to someone in the community with a talent for finding an appropriate melody to fit the meter and rhythm of a text. When Ruby Daniel learned that I was traveling to India in 1996, she delegated me to ask Jacobai Cohen in Kochi to "tune" the text of the Kadavumbhagam Paḷḷi Song (song 8). This is the song describing a magnificent synagogue interior that had been transported from Kochi to Jerusalem, renovated, and opened to the public in the Israel Museum. Ruby had been searching in vain for anyone in Israel who could sing its song. "Cohen is good at tuning songs," she told me, so on arriving in Kochi, I presented him with Ruby's request and a copy of the text (with which he was not familiar).

A week or two later Cohen sang the results for me to record, and he also offered a melody for song 3 (The Second Temple's Destruction), which he had recently tuned. Though he was indeed an expert at tuning songs, Cohen's skills as a singer were lacking, and his recordings could not be easily transcribed. It is fortunate that Venus Lane is an expert in both tuning and singing, so she was able to listen to his recordings and make new transcribable recordings of both songs. She also tuned three songs herself (songs 6, 50 and 55), recording them so that they could be included in this book.

There were other probable instances of "tuning" by the singers themselves. A fragment of song 5 (Mala Palli Song) was first sung by memory for me in 1972 by Leah E. Ben Eliyahu,

an elderly woman in Israel. Recalling some parts of that song and more verses of song 10 (Tekkumbhagam-Kochi Palli Song), she sang both songs to the same melody. Perhaps she had learned both with the same melody, or perhaps she was spontaneously tuning one to match the other. Neither song was recorded by any other singer until 2008, when a much younger in-law of hers, Yocheved Ben Eliyahu, sang the Mala Palli Song to a different tune, taken from one of the *bakkashot* customarily sung in the synagogue in the early morning.

The Words and the Music

Many of our English versions of the songs in this book are metered poetic translations, offered in an effort to capture some of their musicality.[22] Each of the songs is presented both visually and audibly. Visible on the page, the printed English words of the song offer access to the meaning of its Malayalam lyrics - especially important for the reader who does not know Malayalam. Likewise, the musical transcription on the page is an attempt to represent the music of each song visually. It has been difficult to transcribe some of the tunes accurately in Western notation, because the singing style of these Kerala women is fairly flexible in terms of rhythm and pitch, but an effort has been made for the benefit of readers who are able to sight-read musical notations.

Of central importance for this publication are the audio-recordings associated with each translation. Available as a playlist in the website of the Jewish Music Research Centre (https://jewish-music.huji.ac.il/en/playlist/23968), these sound tracks are the live documentation of this song tradition and listeners can grasp through them the peculiar singing style of the Kerala Jewish women with or without the musical transcription. It is our hope that these song recordings, translations, and commentaries will be enjoyed by a wide variety of international readers and listeners, including those who are already interested in Kerala Jewish culture and others who are encountering it here for the first time.

[22] This approach to translation was used successfully by Ophira Gamliel in some of her Hebrew translations from the Malayalam (Zacharia and Gamliel 2005,16), and also by Smita Jassal (2012,31) in her English translations of North Indian women's folksongs.

In the academic world, scholars of ethnomusicology, South Asian Studies and Jewish Studies may find material for their teaching and for their own research. Members of English-speaking synagogues or teachers in Jewish schools might enliven their education programs with songs such as the biblical stories of "Mother Sarah," "Joseph the Righteous," or "David and Goliath." Holiday celebrations might include the songs "Baby Moshe" or "Redeemed from Egypt" during Passover, the rowdy songs about Queen Esther and Haman for Purim, or "The Song of Ruth" for Shavuot. And rabbis and cantors may adapt some of the blessing songs for liturgical use.

Ultimately our primary responsibility and commitment is to the Kerala Jews themselves - the Kochinim and their descendants, most of whom now live in Israel. With this book may they find the voices of women like their own grandmothers and great aunties, celebrating important occasions, entertaining them with stories and inspiring them with blessings.

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