

Negotiating Languages, Religion and Gender for Literary Creativity:
A Case Study of Malayalam Jewish Women's Folksongs

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The linguistic corpus labeled here as Jewish Malayalam Folk Songs (JMFS) has come under serious interdisciplinary investigation during the last twenty years. An international project with theoretical and methodological input from anthropology, linguistics, folklore, translation studies, performance studies, and women's studies, it has involved scholars of Indology, Jewish Studies, Linguistics, Ethnomusicology, etc. The songs have been studied in India as well as Israel, especially since publication of the tri-lingual volume of some fifty songs, *Kārkuḷali-Yefefiah-Gorgeous!* (Zacharia and Gamliel 2005). Interest among scholars here in Kerala was advanced by a 2006 conference, "The Jewish Heritage of Kerala," and through publication of a special issue of the Malayalam journal *Tāpasam: A Quarterly Journal of Kerala Studies* (2006, 1:3). Translations have been published in German (Frenz and Zacharia 2008), and a CD of recorded songs with English translations was produced in Jerusalem (Johnson 2004).

The present volume features English translations and commentary on those songs that have been recorded in musical performance by Kerala Jewish women. I offer my analysis of the songs from a linguistic perspective, in the context of Kerala culture and Malayalam literature and folklore.

This repertoire of JMFS is the possession of Malayalam-speaking Jewish women. Malayalam, the official language of Kerala, belongs to the group of Dravidian languages in South India. It developed during the eighth to tenth centuries CE, as a distinct dialect of the old Dravidian language, Proto-Tamil. This development involved Malayalam's increased use of Sanskrit derivatives and the disuse of certain older forms such as Person-Number-Gender (PNG) markers in finite verbs. According to local tradition and available records, Jews were already living in Kerala much earlier, by the beginning of the Christian era. So, the "Malayalam-ness" of the Kerala Jews goes back to the very beginnings of the language.

At the time of the formation of the modern state of Israel and subsequent migration of Kerala Jews to Israel, the Malayalam-speaking Jews numbered about 2500. Today they and their descendants are known as "Kochinim" in the popular jargon of Israel, where they number more than 8,000. In the past, their ancestors were labeled as "Cochin Jews," though not all of them

lived in Kochi. In many of the western and academic discourses, the focus has been on one group, the Paradesi (“foreign”) Jews in the city of Kochi. This community was always numerically small, but they played an important role in the socio-economic life of Kochi in the colonial period. Most of the early visitors and researchers who came in search of the Jews of Kerala never cared to go beyond Kochi and meet other Jews. This type of partial reporting has distorted treatises on Kerala Jews.

Earlier reports also referred to Jews in Kerala as “Black Jews” and “White Jews”; these were discriminatory names popularized by foreign visitors and colonialists. Members of the Kerala Jewish community prefer not to use these terms to refer to themselves or each other. In intimate conversations, the Malayalam speakers in Israel introduce themselves with epithets referring to the names of their home places and synagogues of origin in Kerala: Parur, Mala, Chendamangalam, Kochi (Paradesi, Kadavumbhagam, or Tekkumbhagam synagogue), and Ernakulam (Kadavumbhagam or Tekkumbhagam synagogue). It is in the new context of their settlements in Israel that we are examining the JMFS.

The American and Israeli anthropologists and ethnomusicologists who conducted research in the Kerala Jewish settlements in Israel identified JMFS as a unique valuable cultural possession of this community. Earlier, Malayalam scholars had failed to notice and include JMFS in literary histories. Why did literary histories with descriptions of Hindu, Christian and Muslim folk literature fail to notice JMFS? One reason could be that Jews themselves did not consider these songs as “literature.” For them, the songs were not primarily aesthetic objects but rather a medium of religious communication, especially religious education. Jewish women of Kerala transmitted religious knowledge through Malayalam songs. The contents of the songs included prayers, blessings, biblical stories, and translations of Hebrew hymns, as well as local community knowledge. So, the songs played an important role in fashioning their self-images as individuals and communities. But these songs as folklore were not and are not stagnant. They are continuing to change as part of the folklore process.

Today much of this Jewish folklore has gained the status of valuable lore that had been “hidden from history” in the Malayalam world and the Jewish world. The narrations of different Jewish communities deserve equal consideration in the academic field. Subjective experiences and imaginations are to be valued for their personal meanings as lived experience. We hope the publication of these songs in different languages and formats will attract a wider audience.

The rediscovery of the JMFS is empowering Kerala Jewish women, especially older women, as valuable resource persons. Women's role in the traditional knowledge system has been revealed with their own interpretations of religious texts and life experiences.

Textual Dynamics and Discourses: Orality, Literacy, and Performance

These songs were transmitted from generation to generation orally and were also written down in women's notebooks (some more than 150 years old) owned by individual women in different synagogue-based communities. Their notebooks gave textual status to the songs, though the primary form of transmission remained oral. This is a very interesting situation of the interplay of orality and literacy. Though these songs are grounded in oral speech, writing has locked them into a visual ground. The term "oral literature" itself has problems. Pure oral literature is expanded to literature that may include both oral forms and those composed in writing and everything in between. This continuum is also part of the folklore process of JMFS.

Women in Kerala performed these songs together in groups on various occasions, such as marriage; circumcision; religious festivals; and family, religious or social gatherings. Their process of reconciling different textual and oral traditions at every performance (this being the primary condition for group performances of songs and dances) illuminates significant extra-linguistic features of JMFS. The term "text" has special significance in this context. Textual structure is important, but textual dynamics as interpersonal communication in contexts must be emphasized here. The textuality of JMFS must be analyzed at the interface of orality and literacy. For this purpose, a "discourse analysis" approach is helpful. As the critical linguist Roger Fowler pointed out, "texts can be regarded as the medium of discourse," and "discourse is the whole complicated process of linguistic interaction between people uttering and comprehending text. To study language as discourse requires, therefore, attention to facets of structure which relate to the participants in communication, the actions they perform through uttering texts, and the contexts within which discourse is conducted" (1986, 80, 85).

The folk process of group-singing by Kerala Jewish women was facilitated in spite of different textual traditions supported by different notebooks. The processes of mutual consultation, decision-making, evolution of leadership, and phonation of songs in groups of Jewish women are marked by a sense of equality and a motivation for aesthetic excellence. This prompts the researcher to assert that Jewish Malayalam women's songs are true folk songs. The

textual variations, as attested by the thirty-eight notebooks now available to researchers, also support the folkloristic nature of these songs. Thus, JMFS has clear significance at the performance level. In practical terms, neither the singing group nor the listeners are always able to interpret satisfactorily the linguistic substance of these songs. So the task of the researcher, especially the one with the linguistic task of translation and interpretation, deserves collegial attention.

When confronted with very popular but opaque JMFS, I was tempted to go beyond the semantics of the songs. Naturally we looked for alternate textual traditions. This brought us to observe rehearsals of Malayalam songs for public performance in contemporary Israel. Differences were sorted out by the women singers through a give and take policy. It was a management principle of convergence that facilitated the evolution of the text. An important concern of the group was to make the text relevant to the context. So, the strength of tradition (both textual and musical) and demands of the context played complementary roles.

The best example in this regard is the “Blessing Song” (song 17). The song is found in twenty-five variants among the thirty-eight catalogued notebooks, representing all six communities from which notebooks were collected. It was used on different occasions as blessing verses with modified words, depending on the occasion. This explains the obscurity of the song at the textual level. But going by the pragmatics, the sense of the verse is clear. Many singers were unable to explain the meaning of these songs. In the textual transmission, performance was more important than textual meaning. The song is not static, but changes at every performance, communicating freshness. During my visit to Israel in 2016, I could see younger Kochini women who are not very thorough in Malayalam language exercising their discretion in the rehearsal sessions of this song.

I based my textualizations and translations of many songs, including the “Blessing Song” (2005, 91–92), on a composite reading of different variants. This process is not really a textual translation, but an interpretation of emic units that I discovered in many of the variants then available. Both the text and the translation are tentative, as they are in the process of continuous change. This provides scope for creativity in the performance of JMFS. To make sense of the songs, one has to carefully discern the performance value of the song. Based on my experience as a Malayalam linguist, I can assume that while singing verses in an old Malayalam that they

did not understand, women of each generation may have split or transformed words in an effort to make sense of them.

As Barbara Johnson has pointed out in her note on the “Blessing Song” (song 17), my 2005 composite version seems to have been based on a song performed for a *brit mila*, judging by references to childbirth in the first two stanzas. The other stanzas ask more general blessings for the family and all assembled, including familiar phrases from the Hebrew prayer book, and the final stanza is just one occurrence of a popular refrain that “wanders” through many songs in the corpus and refers to a popular story about a blessing, with which all the singers and listeners would have been familiar.

In the larger context, some elements of this blessing song come from Hebrew and some from other Malayalam traditions. For example, it has lines similar to songs of Knanaya Christians, who claim Jewish descent, and many parts of this blessing have parallels in Hebrew songs. So, in textualizing, communication is ensured through networking of different traditions. The flow of significance can be gauged and interpreted only through discourse analysis. In discourse analysis, discursive logic is the deciding principle in communication. The blessing song looks like an intertext but ensures smooth flow of thoughts and emotions. Both Malayalam-ness and Hebrew-ness converge to produce a typical Kerala Jewish experience. Every generation is trying to recreate through a smooth process of textualization.

Opaque Linguistic Substance and Discourse Analysis

Here is the task of explaining the JMFS with a lot of opaque linguistic substance but with clear significance. The traditional grammarian will be tempted to label many linguistic forms of these songs as slang or corruption, but the modern linguist who cares for communication as such cannot be satisfied with this labeling. One of the linguistic possibilities for the interpretation of JMFS is discourse analysis, as it enables the researcher to go beyond the limit of sentences. Lexical opacity and syntactic deviations are surpassed by discursive logic, provided by the structure and design of each song and sometimes by the genre of the song. The total collection of JMFS as one repertoire also exerts pressure on the signification process. So, to analyze and describe the signification of JMFS, the researcher can profitably depend on the theory and methodology of discourse analysis.

A major part of discourse analysis is identification of discourse models. Each discourse model must have significant discourse markers. The most visible elements of a discourse model are the discourse markers, but the most decisive elements of a discourse model are the particular discursive logic and the concluding statement. This facilitates the flow of communication in context. Three types of contexts can be identified: contexts of utterance, contexts of culture, and contexts of reference. In the case of each item of JMFS, the researcher must describe the folk, the speakers, the listeners, and the manner of performance.

Some of the songs in the repertoire of JMFS are the special possession of certain synagogue communities. Oral history and the analysis of notebook contents will help to identify such songs—for example, if a particular song is found only in a notebook or notebooks from one community. But many songs are more widely shared, some being found with varied texts in the notebooks of almost all communities. Some songs are performed only for certain occasions and others for many different occasions. Some are sung within the Jewish context and others are sung before guests belonging to different religious groups.

For another example, the material culture represented in the Malayalam Jewish songs also facilitates discursive logic. Words denoting synagogue architecture and furnishings in the synagogue songs, bridal dress and decorations in the wedding songs, and occasional references to musical instruments all represent, semiotically and semantically, the cultural pattern of the society. In short, each song has to be contextualized for meaningful analysis.

Origin Songs

Some songs in the JMFS repertoire may be viewed as origin songs, attempting to trace the origin and rights of the Jews or of particular Jewish communities in Kerala. They are products of historical imagination marked by the identity of places, persons, groups, and the community. They are perspective constructs, inflected by historical, social, and political situations. The diasporic community of Kerala Jews, with cultural and linguistic activities and different aspirations, informs these songs. Borrowing an expression from anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1997, 297–300), we can speak of the ethnoscapas and ideoscapas of JMFS. The suffix “scapes” indicates their inflected nature, perspective construction, and fluidity. So, the framing of the song or the design of the song is a crucial discourse marker.

There are texts in JMFS in which songs transcend the world of everyday experience and construct a context of reference or possible worlds on the basis of ideology. In this type of songs, the lines between realistic and fictional landscapes are blurred. Just as some of the blessing songs, devotional songs, and Zionist songs refer to an imagined Jerusalem (e.g. songs 18, 19, and 64), some wedding songs in the repertoire (such as “The Bridegroom Dressed in Gold,” song 31) speak of royal processions and rituals, and several so-called “historical” songs also follow this pattern.

It will be interesting to note that some of the Paradesi “historical” songs, as well as several of the “origin” songs included here have substantial shifts in the velocity of narration. This shift is the difference between event-time and narration-time, as explained by Alessandro Portelli in his work on oral history (1998, 66):

An informant may recount in a few words experiences which lasted a long time, or dwell at length on brief episodes. These oscillations are significant, though we cannot establish a general norm of interpretation: dwelling on an episode may be a way of stressing its importance but also a strategy to distract attention from other more delicate points. In all cases, there is a relationship between the velocity of the narrative and the meaning of the narrator.

This shift in velocity can be seen in “The Song of Evarayi” (song 2), in “The Song of the Second Temple’s Destruction” (song 3), and in many of the biblical narratives.

Now, let us focus in more detail on the origin song “Oh! Lovely Parrot” (songs 1a and 1b). Found in seven notebooks from Kochi and two notebooks from Parur, the song has two significantly different local variants. A preliminary glance at the two versions in Malayalam brings out a few striking features. The most prominent linguistic marker is the abundance of the archaic Person-Number-Gender (PNG) markers in the finite verbs—a carry-over from old Tamil, not generally characteristic of Malayalam. This consistent use of PNG markers signifies the conscious attempt to convey the past-ness of the content and form; they are built into the story structure to ensure time-order. The Parur version of this song (1a) uses consistent PNG forms, and the Kochi version (1b) also has abundant but less consistent use of the forms.

But the translator or interpreter who gets entangled in these grammatical issues is likely to overlook the communication flow energized by discursive logic, which is sometimes provided by non-grammatical elements. For example, in both the Kochi and Parur “parrot songs,” the

same invocation formula at the beginning is important. It is an invitation to a parrot to come and sing the song. Then, suddenly, we enter the story of the migration of a bird (Kochi version) or a group of birds (Parur version). Specific places are mentioned. There are brief references to the landscape of regions through which the bird or birds are passing. In the Parur version, the birds begin their journey from a forest flowing with honey, living in a cage of gold, but they are hurt by a hunter. Internal rivalries result in deprivation and dishonor, and subsequently they migrate to a place by the sea. The Parur version, using consistent PNG markers, carries this story of their fall. In contrast, the Kochi version ends on an optimistic note. It rejoices in the wealth and grandeur of the new-found land by the sea. Here, the discursive logic is different. It speaks of the story of a strenuous journey to the “promised land.” It ends with a note suggesting contentment with the state of affairs.

Let me very briefly suggest here that these two songs both transitively and intransitively communicate the story of the journey of Kerala Jews. But the name “Jew” is not mentioned in either version of the song. Then how do we emerge with the unanimous conclusion that it is a story of the Jewish community in Kerala? One source is the authority of singers who have performed the song and explained it in these terms. The possibility is also opened up at the linguistic level by the inconsistent use of the PNG markers and of the noun “parrot” in both singular and plural forms. This, again, is a discourse marker that facilitates communication

Genre

Genre is a major organizer of textual components. It facilitates meaningful reading of texts by providing pre-understandings and expectations. Genre is a set of directions that, in turn, will be modified as part of the process of meaningful reading. For example, the Malayalam Jewish song “Oh! Lovely Parrot,” which we have just examined as an origin song, is also a striking example of the Kerala literary genre called *kīlippāṭṭu*, “parrot song,” in which a bird (in many cases a parrot) is invited as a medium to sing a poem. Malayalam-language versions of the Hindu epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are part of this genre, so this Jewish parrot song gets associated with the religious mode in Kerala literature. For the scholar of Malayalam literature, the reading of each *kīlippāṭṭu* in Malayalam, including this Jewish song, will change and redefine the genre, perhaps both synchronically and diachronically. Each item in the genre is both the same and different. This polarity between similarity and difference in genre is worth observing

and interpreting. The empirical and the ideal of the genre contrast and produce the sense of subgenres.

To briefly mention another channel of enquiry: the journey of the Jewish parrot or parrots across the Kerala terrain and ecosystem of lands, forest, and seashore can be viewed in the larger scope of South Indian literature. It reminds us of the older poetic conventions of classical poetry in the literature of the ancient Tamil Sangam period (ca. 300 BCE to 300 CE), which was characterized by lyricism, oral-literacy polarity, and vivid references to human geography, historical places, and personalities.

Another Kerala folk genre that is also manifested in both versions of “Oh! Lovely Parrot” is that of the *kaikottikkalippāṭṭu* folk dance traditionally performed by women in all the Kerala religious traditions—Hindu, Muslim, and Christian as well as Jewish. The dance is performed in a circle with rhythmic clapping of hands. In the text of this Jewish parrot song, the chorus “Ayyayya” is a marker of the genre, and furthermore, the song was specifically identified for the scholars who recorded it as a “clapping song,” both by singers who performed it and by others who did not. Other Jewish songs that have been performed in the circle dance may or may not have the “Ayyayya” marker. (E.g., songs 31, 34, 41, 43, and 51 do not have such a chorus, and song 68 does, but all have been recorded in one “clapping songs” performance).

The JMFS repertoire also includes an example of another Kerala folk genre, that of the *vāśippāṭṭu* or “competition song” sung in the presence of the bride and groom, with the bride’s family sitting on one side and the groom’s side on the other. “Prosper, Prosper: Our Bridegroom, Our Bride” (song 32) has elements of this genre, as found in the folklore of other Kerala communities, and it is recalled that the song was sung in the presence of non-Jewish guests at a special party during the week after the wedding (Daniel & Johnson 1995, 187).

Synagogue Songs and the “Common Sense” of the Region

Yet another Kerala folk genre found in the JMFS repertoire is that of the *paḷḷippāṭṭu*—in Jewish terms the “synagogue song.” (In Malayalam a church, mosque, or synagogue building is called a *paḷḷi*.) In general, the synagogue songs describe the construction and striking features of different synagogue buildings in Kerala. As we can see from oral tradition, archaeological monuments, remembered practices, and suggestive references in the songs, the synagogue community was the basic unit of Kerala Jewish consciousness. Jewish women’s notebooks

include songs associated with six of the eight Kerala synagogues (all except for Chendamangalam and Kadavumbhagam-Ernakulam), numbered as songs 5–10 in this book. In this genre, by its very nature as literature, there is the fine blend of fact and imagination. The structure, design, and semantics of these songs validate the suggestion that they were sung to express the individual identity of each synagogue and its community within the larger network of Kerala Jewish community and Kerala society.

Most of the synagogue songs begin and end with an expression of desire to have a place of Jewish prayer. Jews made this a demand when they were invited to stay in a place. A vivid explanation for why they were invited to stay in a particular locality is found in this statement by a Hindu ruler in the multi-layered Mala Palli Song (song 5, stanzas 3 and 4):

“All kinds of Peoples are found in my land,
But only the Jews are not found in my land.
So ten of you should stay in this place.”

This song employs many literary techniques like dramatic conversations and repetitions to maximize the impact on listeners. These are typical features of oral literature. The conversationalization of the narration without explicit mention of the speakers indicates the oral transmission. Such gaps are common in folk songs, and they are filled up with non-segmental phonemes like tune, pitch, and body language. The performing nature of the song is evident. These dramatic elements and gaps are also characteristic of many of the biblical narrative songs in the JMFS corpus, including “Joseph the Righteous” (song 44), “The Song of Ruth” (song 56) and “Ahashverosh Song” (song 58).

Another possibility for filling up information gaps is generic communication. The synagogue songs maintain the communication flow through “common sense.” The demand of the Jews and the reaction of the local ruler are predictable in this genre. This common sense deserves special attention. Jews insist on maintaining their religious identity, and the local community represented by the local ruler considers it a privilege to have a religious “other” in the country. Kerala as a region has the tradition of multi-religious life. Christianity in Kerala traces its origin to the visit of St. Thomas, one of the disciples of Jesus. The Islamic heritage of Kerala goes back almost to the beginning of Islam. The advent of Jews, Christians, and Muslims is part of Kerala history and folklore, and a major theme in Kerala folklore is that the local community welcomed these religionists and the local rulers provided them land and other

facilities to build synagogues, churches, and mosques. Traditional Thomas Christians of Kerala have church songs with structure and themes similar to the Jewish songs, invoking memories about the donations by local rulers for the building of a church. Historical memories about mosques are also abundant with such references.

Such memories maintained through folk songs and stories and customs have contributed a lot to the communal harmony of Kerala. Each locality has folk songs and folk customs that reinforce this cultural harmony, to such an extent that one can speak of Kerala's folk Christianity, folk Islam, and folk Judaism. In folklore there is a tendency to create genealogical relations among deities of different religions, and folk practices in different parts of Kerala have developed that reconfirm these genealogical relationships.

In Kerala, any offense against a place of worship is considered as very bad, as illustrated in the Mala Palli Song (song 5). The Hindu King of Kodungallur gave permission for the Jews to collect the choicest wood from the forest for the construction of their synagogue, but the neighboring ruler of Attangad seized the wood and built a Hindu temple with it, and the temple then caught fire. According to the folk belief system of Kerala, a fire at the place of worship is a sign of divine displeasure. It is not a punishment inflicted on the temple from outside. The divinity of the temple itself does not tolerate such an act. The moral anger comes from inside.

This belief system becomes even more explicit in an episode in the "Parur Palli Song" (song 6). The beautiful Parur Synagogue was cherished by the local community as a whole, not only the Jews. Then came some Portuguese—the colonialists—and landed nearby in a boat. Asking "Why should the Jews have a palli so fine?" they fired a shot and broke one of the bright synagogue lamps. They were strongly admonished by the "justice-loving boatman," a representative of the ordinary folk, who pointed out to them the impropriety and offence they had committed.

This imaginary scene in the Parur synagogue represents the civil society of traditional Kerala, a society that gets offended at the politicization of religion. Today political parties, media, and intellectuals in India are under heavy pressure from national and global forces to move out of the local practices. Still, Kerala society resists such forces of religious nationalism and global religious fundamentalism, though one can discern tendencies to sanitize local religious communities from localisms and connect them to the global grid. In the name of religious purity, local identities are purged.

The classical example of this effort in Kerala history was the Roman Catholic Synod of Diamper (1599), organized by the Portuguese colonizers to purge the Kerala Christians of so-called “heresies” (Zacharia 1994). In the postcolonial world, the same forces are at work in different guises. Cultural and religious nationalism today plays a role in destabilizing the communal relations of regions like Kerala. A discerning student of the history of religions in Kerala can profitably identify the folk religious practices of the region that contribute to its socio-religious dynamics. A student of postcolonial studies can examine the inter-relationship of world, nation, and region in folk narratives. In JMFS, there is a strong tendency to maintain religious space without erasing the boundary lines of the region, distinguishing between genre and discourse models. This is not a question of merely theoretical importance but of practical implications in cross-cultural translation and interpretation.

“Jewish Malayalam”

In many other parts of the world, Jews living in diaspora developed special Jewish languages like Yiddish (Judeo-German), Ladino (Judeo-Spanish), and Judeo-Arabic. This type of linguistic hybridization and development of an independent language did not take place in Kerala. The JMFS testify to the presence of an independent Jewish literature in Malayalam, but do not in themselves prove the existence of a Jewish Malayalam language or dialect. But the current state of research, as represented by Ophira Gamliel’s doctoral dissertation (2009), does give evidence for the presence of Jewish Malayalam. She adopts the criteria provided by Jewish scholars like Bar-Asher (2002), who argues that a Jewish language has at least one of the following criteria: verbatim translations of pan-Jewish texts, reference to pan-Jewish texts in daily speech, Hebrew and/ or Aramaic components, and archaic components of the host language. According to Dr. Gamliel, Jewish Malayalam may meet these criteria.¹

The vocabulary of the JMFS includes a large number of Hebrew words, such as *Torah*, *shalom*, *minyan*, *sefer*, *heikhal*, *mashiyah*, *melekh*, and *mikdash*, but their texts are written in Malayalam script and the core of the linguistic substance is Dravidian, similar to contemporary Malayalam. The vocabulary of the songs also includes many Malayalam words for Jewish concepts—words that are archaic Dravidian derivatives not attested in other literary models. The best examples are names for God that are built on loan translations from Hebrew. Another is a

¹ See also Gamliel 2016.

special word expressing the Jewish concept of redemption, coined according to well-accepted morphological rules from the Dravidian root *miḷ*. The terms *miḷca* (redemption) and *miḷcakkāran* (redeemer) are frequently found in JMFS but are non-existent in general Malayalam. The JMFS contain variants of these two words, sometimes altered beyond recognition.

Because of the frequency of such archaisms, an ordinary Malayalam speaker would be bewildered by the opaqueness of JMFS. Even the women who still sing these songs today may not understand some of the words they use. But the linguistic archaisms—as well as the Hebrew borrowings and many biblical allusions in the songs—contribute to the speakers’ sense of ethno-religious distinctiveness. They show a Jewish religious consciousness that maintained its conceptual borders carefully, illustrating the Jewishness as well as the “Malayalam-ness” of the songs and their singers.

Hyphenation

This brings us to the conclusion that JMFS as a discourse illustrates the active Jewish participation in the hyphenated society of Kerala. Multiculturalism can be represented through this linguistic metaphor. A hyphenated society, like a hyphenated compound, has components with clearly marked boundaries. The hyphen maintains borders intact but ensures that the components work together first, like a single word. So does the working of Kerala’s hyphenated society, which has distinct local communities and distinct religious groups. In the past, Buddhism and Jainism lost their distinctiveness in the mainstream of Kerala Hinduism. But the practitioners of Semitic religions—Jews, Christians, and Muslims—were accepted as distinct groups, not as a necessary evil but as a blessing.

The Kerala historian Dr. M.G. S. Narayanan (1972) labeled this process as “cultural symbiosis” to emphasize the distinctiveness and networking of these religious groups. Here we see that the study of JMFS from the perspective of linguistics and discourse analysis can contribute to greater understanding of multiculturalism and of the Kerala Jews as a group and Kerala culture as a whole.