

Songs 57, 58, 59: Three Purim Songs

Taken as a narrative and performative set, these three Malayalam songs combine universal Jewish elements and local features in their content, melodies, and literary style. In content, they add Kerala flourishes while narrating episodes from the biblical book of Esther and related midrash associated with the spring celebration of Purim. This holiday is an occasion for drama and merriment throughout the Jewish world. On this day, the book of Esther should be ritually recited aloud from a special *megillah* (scroll) and heard by every Jew. The three songs are presented here in a narrative sequence following events portrayed in the megillah of Esther.

While some melodies for the three Purim songs are taken from Hebrew piyyutim, others are derived from folk dance-dramas traditionally performed by Kerala Christians in the Chavittunatakam¹ style, as was enthusiastically explained in 1977 by Jewish singers who recorded song 58 for me in Kochi. Though the four singers had witnessed many of these dramas, they had never happened to see the Christian troupe perform one with a Jewish theme. I later discovered that at least one such drama had been produced more than forty years earlier and viewed by the noted Jewish elder Abraham B. Salem (father of Balfour Salem, one of the 1977 singers). In his personal diary, Mr. Salem mentioned attending three performances in Jewtown-Kochi of the “kicking drama . . . of the Story of Esther,” held in the large synagogue compound. He wrote, “I witnessed the same till about 1 AM and retired.... It was indeed picturesque . . . and the dress of the actors were attractive and curious.”²

The Chavittunatakam dramas performed in Kerala today still feature brightly costumed kings and queens and villains; a comic narrator; background singers; melodramatic acting; and “foot-stamping” dancing, kicking, and jumping (Puthuserry 1997, 2003/2004. For an informative and enjoyable introduction, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nviUc2ghKIw&t=32s>).

Like the Christian dramas, the three Malayalam Jewish Purim songs in this section portray colorful kings, queens, and villains, and each is divisible into dramatic scenes. Some of the episodes could certainly be called melodramatic, and they incorporate abundant dialogue and commentary in a humorous, colloquial style. Portions of them are set to melodies with a strong rhythmic beat associated with

¹ *Caviṭṭunāṭakam* is the Malayalam spelling of this term.

² A. B. Salem Papers, Diary 3, 1931, 140–144.

“foot-stamping” dance steps. For a detailed discussion of the comparison, see Johnson 2018.

Contributing to the analysis of Purim as a Jewish ritual of reversal (Rubenstein 1992), it should be noted that the tone of satire pervades all three songs. They not only poke fun at the villains—Haman and his daughter and the drunkard King Ahashverosh—but also at least partially portray Queen Esther and even Mordecai “the Righteous” as clever but somewhat less than heroic.

The three Purim songs also share an interesting linguistic feature. As in Kerala Hebrew recitations of the *Megillat Esther*, the name of the villain Haman is pronounced and spelled *Omon*, according to a special Hebrew pronunciation that is unique to Kerala and used only for special liturgical readings and songs.³

³ See the work of ethnomusicologist Johanna Spector (1984-85), who recorded examples of this special pronunciation in Kochi and noted its similarity to the liturgical Hebrew of Yemenite and Kurdish Jews.