RELIGION, POWER AND THE FORMING OF A 'CHRISTIAN SELF'

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Abstract

Within the bewildering mass of different churches and denominations in Kerala, Syrian Christian churches claim the oldest lineage for they profess the legacy of St. Thomas Christians. The authority and power structure of the Syrian Christian church can be seen as a result of the economic, legal and spiritual relationship between the 'divine' and the worshippers. This relationship is both hierarchical and patriarchal which the church perpetuates through certain rituals and practices like 'keeping as slave' (adima), baptism etc. and it creates a division among the worshippers who constitute the mass. By analyzing archival records of a Syrian Christian church in central Kerala, this paper argues that the formation of a 'Christian self' cannot be considered as a natural or innocent phenomenon rather, it is a constructed mechanism for controlling and disciplining individuals and family. The paper also argues that the authority and power of the church also contributed in forming a 'dedicated' but 'gendered' Christian self through its rituals, practices, prayers and beliefs.
__Keywords:__ Authority, Power, 'Adima', Marriage, Gender, Self, Syrian Christians.

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Introduction

Within the states and union territories in India, perhaps Kerala has the largest number of Christian sects[i]. The world of Christianity in Kerala cannot be considered as a mere imitation of Western churches; rather there were attempts of resistance to keep the Eastern traits and beliefs within the Kerala churches. Gauri Viswanthan, a renowned historian argues that the public life of Christians in Kerala is 'related to its political affiliation to Hindu kings, its acquiescence to Hindu norms of purity and pollution, its own status and rank consciousness, and its adherence to customs linked with food, language and culture' (Viswanathan 1999).

The St. Thomas Christians trace their lineage to the 1st century AD, to the popular conversion history of St. Thomas, one of the disciples of Jesus Christ who believed to had come to India. The Church which was there in South India was a branch of the heretic Nestorian Church of Persia and never was there an Orthodox Church in India until the introduction of Roman Catholic Church in the sixteenth century[ii]. In the Portuguese period, initially, they did not interfere in the doctrines of Syrian Christians but over the time the relationship had changed. The Portuguese expressed dissatisfaction with the Syrian Christians' interpretation of Christianity. The native Syrian Christians wanted to retain their identity and to incorporate without assimilation whereas the Portuguese wanted absorption and subjugation not only of ritual and doctrine but also of the culture (Philip 2002). By 1523, the Portuguese openly attacked Syrian Christians for being Nestorian heretics. After the Oath of Coonan Cross in1653 the Syrian Christians split into two, those who revolted against the Portuguese ecclesiastical oppression and again sought the links with the Jacobite patriarchs of west Asia came to be known as *Puthenkoor* (Jacobites)*,* and those who supported the Portuguese were called *Pazhayakoor* (Philip 2002)*.* By the British period, a new identity formation happened where the converted Christian identity collapsed with a Western Christian identity.

Methodology and Objectives

By analyzing the letters written to a church in central Kerala, which is known as Mar Thoma Cheriyapally, by different individuals at various points of time, it has been observed that an individual's life from birth to death, the church had been intervening, regulating

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and controlling the believers. This paper looks at the various mechanisms through which, the church was intervening the life of individual, how did they intervene and what was the result of this intervention?

A 'Christian and Dedicated Self'

At different stages of the life of an individual, who belongs to the Jacobite Syrian Christian community, certain religious rituals (mainly birth, marriage and death) are performed with the life stages. A historian Susan Thomas has argued that this attempt of the church was in harmony with the emerging Victorian morality in the colonial period (Thomas 2014). The ritual cycle starts with baptism.

Viswanathan states that baptism is the ritual in which one formally becomes a Christian by removing all her/his 'devils, evil and polluted souls' as according to the Scriptures, the body of the child is a temple for the God and not a home of the evil (Viswanathan 1999, 125). It is also an affirmation of the child as a member of the community. The baptism ritual is not only a 'purification process' of one's soul but also an individual's body. The child will be considered impure and unblessed until the child is baptized. The baptism is usually held after forty days of male child and fifty six days after the birth of female child. If the child dies before it can be baptized, it is as if a terrible sin has been cast over the family. A child is being born in a Christian family but, it does not die as a Christian, is a sin.

What is to be noted is that family is an important unit here. The family's approval of child as a blessed soul and body is through the rituals of baptism. This is evident from the practice that if the child dies before it shall be baptized, then the child is not recognized as belonging to the family. This is because the soul and body of the child have the Original Sin[iii]. Therefore many anabaptized children are buried outside the family tomb inside the cemetery without given any rites or rituals for the salvation of the soul. But sometimes they are even buried outside the cemetery. Being a Christian and a member of a Christian family demands a blessed soul and body.

There is an oath taken at the occasion of the baptism and the child should promise that it will obey the rules and regulations of the church. On behalf of the child, the godparent recites the vow 'Lord, whatever has been received as law by the prophets, apostles, fathers, I will receive and believe'. The priest then makes the sign of cross on the fore head of the child three times as a sign of the child's membership in the Christian church (Viswanathan 1999, 125). Hence the notion comes that one becomes 'true Christian' (*sathyachristyani*) only after baptism and the child who dies before is considered as a sinful soul and therefore not a 'true Christian'. The prayers for the salvation of the body are not done in such cases. This could be because as the soul of the child is non-blessed, there would not be any further blessings given and as the body is the carrier of an unblessed soul, it may consider as a heinous body and thus need not be blessed. Baptism is also a ritual in which the priest says for the soul of the child shall receive salvation, grace

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and mercy and considers that the soul is born again (Viswanathan 1999, 125). So the salvation of the soul is possible when the self is blessed.

Viswanathan argues that baptism is essentially a symbolic act and it announces the entry of another Christian into the association of the community. 'It is in that sense linear, biographical and non repetitive. On another level it repeats, homologically, the baptism of the Christ... the removal of the pollution and sin, which for Christians are innate in man by his very nature, is the primary expressive function of baptism' (Viswanathan 1999). The baptism confirms the child into the church. So the responsibility of leading a 'pure Christian moral life' will start from baptism itself. It can be seen as an individual's obligation to live a life according to the rules and regulation of the church. The godparent is the one who is confirming on the behalf of the child that the child will obey the church and follow the religion, but the moral obligation of the individual starts from it.

Apart from baptism, there is another practice known as 'keeping of *adima' (adima vekkal)*[iv]. The term is literally translated as slave, but the meaning it implies is different. In this context slave is not an object for exchange or does not fit into the concept of slaves in the traditional caste system. This practice is there only in certain churches. For instance mostly in the churches which are built in the names of saints and St. Mary. This particular which is referred to is a 15th century church which is believed to be built in 1455 AD in the central part of Kerala. In the year 1685, a saint, Yeldho Mar Baselious, who had come from Iraq was died and entombed here. The church is famous in the name the Saint now. So, at the time of baptism, some people keep their child as an *adima* to the Saint. When this child is old enough to get married they have to withdraw their own 'ownership' from the Saint by paying a certain amount of money to the church following the idea that one can be fully committed to or submitted to only a single person at a time. From the manuscripts recovered from the church baptism, keeping as *adima* (*adima vekkal*) and withdrawal of *adima* (*adima veendath*) was a regular source of income. For each of these one had to pay separate money. People used to pay the fees as kind or in rice/paddy worth the concerned amount.

However, this is not a compulsory practice to be followed by every Jacobite Syrian Christian. When a child born to a family is a much awaited child or the child has some diseases, the parents offer the 'life of the child' to serve as an *adima* to the saint; Yeldho Mar Baselious, who was entombed in the church. Keeping the child as *adima* to the Saint would mean a complete dedication of one's soul and body, in other words the child is committing his prerogative on his self to the 'Saint'. We have to note two things here; first, it was the family who was on behalf of the child is dedicating the child and secondly, it is 'he' who becomes an *adima* and only very rarely 'she' becomes one. The *adimas* have to compulsorily follow the rituals, customs and practices of the specific church and should attend the Holy Qurbana every week. People belong to other parishes within the Jacobite Syrian Christians can also keep *adima*. In such cases the child should visit the Mar Thoma

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Cheriyapally at least once a year and if possible at the time of the commemorative festival[v] of the Saint. Earlier, there was a practice of putting a copper ring in the left ear of the *adima*, for other people to know that he is a slave to the Saint[vi]. Canonically, one could withdraw *adima* when the child hits puberty. The belief goes, as the child hits puberty there are chances of him to get 'polluted or corrupted'. In conversation with a parish priest of Mar Thoma Cheriya palli he said:

'When a child is an *adima* to the saint, he is supposed to lead a life similar to a saintly life without falling into the 'sins of the corrupt world', just as a master doesn't want his slave to be leading a life other than the master wants him to be[vii]'.

Though the priest explains the practice literally in terms of slave- master relationship which existed in the slavery system, its practices would not be translated exactly with that notion though there are some similarities. I argue that the dedication of one's self is important here and this dedication is towards an authority. I also argue that there is a gender performativity associated with this practice because this practice is majorly done with male children and only rarely a female child becomes 'adima'. This could be because of the taboos and 'impurity' associated with the female body regarding the menstruation.

Generally, family withdraws *adima* before marriage. So when the individual is old enough to get married he has to withdraw from his own dedication from the Saint by paying a certain amount of money to the church. The idea is that one can be fully committed to or submitted to only a single person at a time. So when the individual gets married, there is a shift in his obligation of his self from the Saint to his wife. Many churches have the practice of keeping *adima* and interestingly, this practice exists even now.

Therefore my argument is that these rituals and practices contribute to the formation of a 'dedicated' and a 'Christian Self'. This shows that only after performing and following certain particular rituals one is qualified to live a Christian life. I argue that this is a mechanism of evolving and disciplining one's self. For the believers the church was a protector and therefore for the solutions of many of the problems, both personal and others, they were dependent on the church. It seemed that the church had also projected itself as the savior and the ultimate word of 'right' and 'wrong' would be that of the church. Sin is a part of Christian moral life as much as faith is. A sin is anytime more severe than a mistake. This mechanism of the church is a disciplinary mechanism of not only the soul but also the body.

The church through its rituals and certain practices like *adima*, marriage etc. also creates and perpetuates the gender division. The division and the creation of binaries cannot be considered as a natural and innocent phenomenon. The church creates thus notion of gender which is hierarchical and discriminatory. The decorum, rules and

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regulations for performing certain rituals, spatial divisions inside the church building etc. underlines this division and hierarchy. The females should stand on one side and the males on the other. In early churches, the practice was to have men at the front and women at the back reiterating this gender subordination. The church does not allow the females to reach beyond a certain point inside the church building and also not allowed to enter the *madbaha*. It is to be noted that there are separate prayers for males and females in the rituals including baptism, marriage and death.

There are rules and regulations for funeral also. The place for one's grave inside the premises of the church cemetery is decided upon the kind of life that one has lived. As Viswanathan argues that 'the rituals of death express the relation between the body and the soul, and the symbolic relation between the living and the dead. All death ceremonies are specifically for the 'good' Christian, who has followed the rules and tenets of the faith. Those who have broken the law are excommunicated and denied a proper funeral (Viswanathan 1999, 137)'. Funeral is the time when all debts are paid. Only after the completion of all obligations, the dead body is taken to the cemetery or else it may lead to a delay in the burial itself. Usually such delays do not occur as people never fail to pay the debts and other payments to the church. The responsibility of leading a moral life as a 'true Christian' will continue till the death of a person.

Conclusion

I conclude the paper by arguing that the Jacobite Syrian Christian Church, which claims the oldest lineage of the presence of Christianity in India in the first century AD continues to perpetuate a hierarchical, discriminatory and gendered rituals, practices and beliefs among the believers. The church through its rituals and certain practices like baptism, *adima*, marriage, funerals etc. also creates a division and discrimination among the followers. The rituals contributes to the forming of one's self to be a religious self, more specifically a 'Christian self' which shall be disciplined and moulded through various interventions of the church as an institution. A Christian self also demands a dedicated and blessed soul and body. For this it is mandatory for a person to go through all these rituals and practices which are imposed upon them.

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[i]According to Census 2011, out of 1210 million population, 27 million (2.3%) are Christians in India. Christianity has emerged as the major religion in three North-eastern states, namely, Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya. Among other states/UTs, Manipur (34.0%), Goa (26.7%), Andaman & Nicobar Islands (21.7%), Kerala (19.0%), and Arunachal Pradesh

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(18.7%) have considerable percentage of Christian population to the total population of the State/UTs. Among these states, Kerala has the maximum land area and population, and the size of the Christian population may be assessed in this perspective also.

ii The Nestorian church held the belief that there were two natures in Christ; the divine and the human, with very little relationship between them where as the Orthodox believed that there was only one nature in Jesus Christ, in which the human and the divine were brought together.

iii Sin did by Adam and Eve's in the Eden garden- the sin of disobedience in consuming the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. It is believed that everybody is born with the Original Sin and it is cleansed through baptism.

iv Literally translated as 'slave'

v Celebrated in the name of Mar Basil Day.

vi Harikrishnan, a native of the locality aged 80, in an informal interview said on 22nd July 2016.

vii Literal translation of the extract from an informal conversation between Fr. Jose Paranayil on 10th January 2017. Fr. Paranayil was the main parish priest of Mar Thoma Cheriya Palli before.

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