



## **‘Dance of the Converted’: Margamkali and Cultural Hybridity of Syrian Christians in Kerala**

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**Abstract :** *Margamkali, the indigenous dance form of the community of Syrian Christians of Kerala is the thrust focus of this article . In the first segment, the origin, history, and cultural evolution of Margamkali are critically elaborated upon and it is seen as part of the identity formation of the community of Syrian Christians . The orature based lyrics of Margamkali songs are reflected upon as the expression of the rich theological and philosophical foundations of Christianity. The second segment analyses the artistic and cultural significance of the performance of this folk dance, mainly by women, on the occasion of weddings and church festivals. Despite its entertainment value it has played an integral performative role in realising cultural hybridity and syncretization of the life, beliefs, and customary practices of Syrian Christianity with the lores of the indigenous communities of Kerala in particular and India in general. The third segment delves deeper into the anthropological and sociological strands of the symbiotic assimilation and exchanges between Christianity and Hinduism in the span the of long decades of pluralistic coexistence. Using select theoretical concepts from Homi K Bhabha, the study attempts to look into the the rhetoric of hybridity, negotiation of cultural meaning creolization and cultural translation. In the conclusion, the future of*

*this art form in the hybrid cultural landscape of Kerala is briefly reflected upon.*

**Key words:** Christianity, Collective Memory, Culture, Heritage, Hybridity, Oral Tradition, Performance, Pluralistic Spaces, Syncreticism

Margamkali, a traditional Christian folk dance and ritualistic art form that holds a significant place in the cultural and religious life of the St. Thomas Christians (also known as Nasranis) in Kerala, India is deeply rooted in the history and traditions of Kerala's Christian community, and serves as a compelling testament to the syncretic nature of the region's cultural heritage. This article examines Margamkali, an artistic expression that rose to prominence amidst the broader integration of Christianity in Kerala, fostering cultural hybridization and plurality against the backdrop of the rigid religious consciousness of Syrian Christians. The study analyzes Margamkali as an art form that facilitated syncretization, ultimately leading to the formation and definition of a new identity for the Christian community in this culturally progressive state. As a cultural expression, Margamkali was revitalized and reimagined as a platform to enact the collective memory of a community that had undergone various transformations in a space conducive to intercultural relations. The article is structured into three segments. The first segment provides a detailed history of Margamkali, tracing its origins and evolution. The second segment offers a critical analysis of Margamkali, examining its artistic and cultural significance. The third segment conceptualizes the idea of 'hybridity' by drawing upon the theoretical frameworks advanced by Homi Bhabha, situating this cultural form within the multicultural context of Kerala society. In conclusion, the arguments are synthesized to reveal how this vibrant art form contributed to the social formation

and identity of the Christian community in the pluralistic society of Kerala.

Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity is a cornerstone in postcolonial theory, addressing the complex interactions and cultural exchanges that occur in colonial and postcolonial contexts where hybridity brings out the creation of new cultural forms and identities that emerge from the mixing of colonizer and colonized cultures (Bhabha 112). Bhabha argues that this process of cultural fusion disrupts established boundaries and power hierarchies, leading to a "third space" where new meanings and identities can be negotiated. In this "third space," traditional binaries such as colonizer/colonized and self/other are challenged, allowing for the coexistence of multiple identities and perspectives (37). Hybridity thus becomes a site of resistance and transformation, where marginalized groups can assert their agency and reconfigure cultural narratives (Hoogvelt 145). Bhabha's concept is particularly relevant to the study of Margamkali, as it illustrates how this art form embodies the syncretic blending of indigenous and Christian elements, resulting in a unique cultural expression that reflects the hybrid identity of Kerala's Christian community. By situating Margamkali within this theoretical framework, the study highlights the dynamic and evolving nature of cultural identity in a pluralistic society.

The concept of hybridity in cultural expressions has been extensively studied in various global, pan-Indian, and Keralite contexts (Werbner 133-152; Hutnyk 79-102; Jay 176-194). Existing literature highlights how similar art forms have emerged as significant sites of cultural syncretization, leading to the formation of hybrid identities (Werbner 133-152; Deborah 45-60; Papastergiadis 78-95). Globally, studies on

Caribbean carnival traditions, such as the Trinidad Carnival, illustrate how African, European, and Indigenous influences have fused to create a vibrant cultural expression (Mercer 45-60; Cowley 78-95; Liverpool 112-130). These carnivals are not just festive occasions but also potent symbols of resistance and identity formation for postcolonial societies. Scholars like Stuart Hall have emphasized how these cultural performances serve as dynamic spaces for negotiating identities and challenging colonial legacies (Hall 25).

In the pan-Indian context, the Kathak dance form exemplifies hybridity through its synthesis of Hindu and Muslim cultural elements. Originating in the courts of North Indian Mughal rulers, Kathak blends devotional Hindu storytelling with Persian aesthetics and Islamic cultural practices. (Walker 7). Ananya Chatterjea and other scholars have argued that Kathak's evolution reflects the broader historical processes of cultural intermingling and adaptation, challenging rigid religious and cultural boundaries (Chatterjea 75). Within Kerala, the art form of Theyyam offers another compelling example. Theyyam, a ritualistic performance involving dance, music, and elaborate costumes, integrates indigenous tribal traditions with elements of mainstream Hindu practices (Gopi 201). Scholars such as Philip Zarrilli have highlighted how Theyyam's hybridity underscores the region's diverse cultural heritage and facilitates a dialogic space for various social and religious communities (Zarrilli 89). Analytically, these examples demonstrate how hybrid art forms function as transformative cultural practices. They challenge dominant cultural narratives, facilitate intercultural dialogue, and enable marginalized communities to assert their identities. By drawing on Homi Bhabha's theoretical framework, these

studies underscore the significance of the 'third space' in fostering new cultural forms and identities. Applying this theoretical perspective to Margamkali, the article argues that this art form serves a similar function within the Christian community of Kerala. Margamkali not only embodies the syncretic blending of local and Christian elements but also acts as a medium for the community to negotiate and express its hybrid identity. This analytical approach helps to illuminate the broader cultural and social implications of Margamkali in the pluralistic society of Kerala, demonstrating its role in the ongoing processes of cultural exchange and identity formation.

Margamkali is performed predominantly by women, though there are variations involving men as well. The dance is typically staged during important religious and social occasions, such as weddings, church feasts, and festivals. The performers, clad in traditional white dhotis and tunics, move in a circular formation, symbolizing the unity and eternal nature of the Church. The dance is accompanied by traditional Christian devotional songs in Malayalam, which narrate biblical stories and the life of St. Thomas. The choreography of Margamkali is marked by its graceful and rhythmic movements, which are both simple and profound in their execution. The dancers' synchronized steps and gestures are often guided by the lead performer, known as the "Asan" or master, who recites verses and coordinates the group. The absence of musical instruments, with the dance relying solely on the rhythmic clapping of hands and the vocal support of the singers, adds a unique aural dimension to the performance. The narrative content of the songs, known as "Margamkali pattu," is an integral part of the performance. These songs are rich in theological and philosophical themes, reflecting the

community's religious beliefs and values. The lyrics often highlight the missionary zeal of St. Thomas, his miracles, and the early Christian community's trials and triumphs (Velliyan and Chummar 25). Over the centuries, Margamkali has evolved, incorporating various regional and cultural influences while retaining its core religious significance. In contemporary times, it continues to be a vibrant expression of the Kerala Christian identity, celebrated not only within the community but also recognized as an important cultural heritage of Kerala. Efforts to preserve and promote Margamkali, including its inclusion in cultural festivals and academic studies, underscore its enduring relevance. Margamkali stands as a remarkable example of the confluence of religion, culture, and art. Its enduring appeal lies in its ability to convey profound spiritual themes through a simple yet powerful medium of dance and song. As an art form, it not only preserves the historical and religious narratives of the St. Thomas Christians but also fosters a sense of communal identity and continuity. Understanding Margamkali offers valuable insights into the rich tapestry of Kerala's cultural and religious landscape, highlighting the unique contributions of the Christian community to the region's heritage.

### **Faith and Art: Syrian Christians and Margamkali in Kerala's historical context**

Kerala, often regarded as the cradle of Indian Christianity, claims St. Thomas as the founder of Christianity in the region. Kerala's culture is a rich tapestry woven from Aryan and Dravidian civilizations, influenced significantly by various foreign invasions and interactions. These influences have shaped the traditions, customs, and way of life in Kerala. Despite these changes, the people have maintained their age-

old traditions, creating an organic continuity while simultaneously embracing new trends. According to the Nation Master Encyclopaedia, the term "Syrian Christians" relates to the Aramaic-speaking Jewish tradition. Kerala Christians, or Nazarenes, are descendants of early Christians who converted from Judaism, believed in Jesus Christ, and closely followed Jewish traditions. The community's religious practices and liturgy are derived from Chaldean rites, reflecting their Aramaic linguistic heritage, which is also known as Syrian. The Syrian Christian community in Kerala historically comprises two major divisions. The first, known as Northists (Vadakkumbhagakkar), consists of indigenous Kerala natives who converted to Christianity in the first century AD. The second division, known as Southists (Thekkumbhagakkar), includes migrants from a Jewish Christian community from West Asia. A subgroup, the Knanaya or Southists, trace their lineage to Thomas of Cana, while the Northists claim descent from the early Christians evangelized by St. Thomas the Apostle (Fuller 57). According to oral history and popular narratives, St. Thomas arrived in Kodungalloor in AD 52 and founded seven churches in Kerala. These narratives are crucial to the Syrian Christians, as their identity is closely tied to the arrival and life of St. Thomas.

The Syrian Christians of Kerala rely on traditions handed down through generations, which have gradually shaped the collective memory of the community. Known in Christian literature as doubting Thomas, they believe their conversion to Christianity occurred as early as AD 52, when St. Thomas arrived in India with a trade ship that landed at Muziris. St. Thomas's mission in spreading Christianity in Persia and India is a pivotal aspect of their history. They believe they

were converted from the noble Brahmin community of Kerala in the first century itself. Over time, St. Thomas Christians established their social status by relating to upper-caste Hindus, influenced by their numerical strength, influence, and observance of many Brahmin customs. St. Thomas is said to have founded seven churches or communities at Kodungallur, Kollam, Niranam, Kottakkavu, Kokkamangalam, Nilackel, and Chayal, collectively known as Ezharappallikal (meaning seven churches and a half church). Additionally, Thiruvithamcode church near Kanyakumari, and churches at Malayattoor and Aruvithara, were called Arappallikal (half church) (Velliyan 55).

Margamkali, one of the ancient art forms of Kerala practiced by Syrian Christians in general and Knanaya Syrian Christians in particular, reflects this rich history. Initially, this folk-dance was performed by men during marriage celebrations and church festivals, beautifully blending religion, history, culture, customs, faith, and art. Although the exact origins of Margamkali cannot be precisely traced, it is believed to have been popular long before the Portuguese arrived in Kerala. The text and theme of Margamkalipattu, which narrate the life of St. Thomas in fourteen stanzas, were widely prevalent in Travancore and surrounding areas. By the late 1950s and 1960s, Margamkali was nearly extinct, but it experienced a revival with increased spectatorship, gaining new life. The oral tradition of Margamkali pattu, meaning 'song of the way,' attempts to historicize the true events that took place during the community's socio-cultural evolution (Viswanathan 27). The word "Margam" literally means 'way' or 'path,' and "kali" means 'dance.' In the early times, conversion to Islam and Christianity was called "Margam Cheruka" or joining the way. Those who embraced a new faith

were called "Margakkar " (converts) or people who joined the new way. Therefore, in this context, Margamkali can also be defined as the dance of those who changed faith. The information on the existence of Margamkali is evident from sculptures at the base of the famous Granite Cross in Kaduthuruthi, Kerala, known to have been blessed in 1559. This art form holds a special place in the cultural and religious landscape of Kerala's Syrian Christians. The tradition of the Malabar Coast is well represented in the memories and lives of people identifying as St. Thomas Christians. The collective memory of this community goes back to the birth of Christ and the arrival of St. Thomas in AD 52 to the coast of Malabar. These historically significant events are intricately connected with the community's identity, with Margamkali playing a crucial role in preserving and enacting their rich heritage (Fuller 54). Margamkali is not merely an art form but a vibrant expression of the collective memory and evolving identity of Kerala's Syrian Christians. It symbolizes the community's journey, blending ancient traditions with modern influences, and stands as a testament to the syncretic nature of Kerala's cultural heritage.

The origins of Margamkali are subject to various interpretations and beliefs. Some scholars trace its roots to Jewish wedding songs and dance performances, while others suggest that it derives from Sangam Kali, a dance tradition of Brahmins. Additionally, some theories propose that it evolved from Yathra Kali, a performance art of Namboothiri Brahmins in Kerala. The intermediate verses in the first stanza of Margamkali explicitly mention the settlement of Knanaya Christians in Kerala under the leadership of Thomas of Cana and Bishop Joseph of Ouraha (Edessa), highlighting their desire to remain united. The introduction of early Christianity

in Kerala may be attributed to the region's ancient trade relations with Mediterranean countries, reflecting the socio-political developments arising from these interactions. This hypothesis aligns with the broader context of Margamkali songs, which are based on the *Acta Thomae*, written by Burdusan of Ouraha in the 2nd century. Margamkali songs serve as archival repositories of the Syrian Christian community's aspirations, customs, traditions, and habits, encapsulating their collective memories and emotions. These songs constitute a significant component of the oral literature (orature) of the community, reflecting the trials and tribulations endured by its members. Moreover, the songs offer insights into the community's internal dynamics, particularly the segregation into two factions known as Northies (Vadakkumbagakkar) and Southies (Thekkumbagakkar). This explanation provides a nuanced perspective that differs from generally accepted historical narratives.

### **Deconstructing Margamkali: Lyrical Narratives, Choreographic Expressions, and Cultural Syncretism**

Chola King of Mylapore, who instructs his minister Avan to find a master architect to construct a magnificent mansion. Eventually, St. Thomas is brought before the King, who is impressed by a detailed drawing made by the Apostle. Following this, numerous materials are gathered for the construction, but St. Thomas departs for his evangelical mission in Kerala, then Malacca and China. Upon his return, St. Thomas is imprisoned by the King. During this period, the King falls ill and, while nearing death, he has a vision where angels take his soul to heaven, showing him the mansion prepared for Chozhan. Reviving with this revelation, the King

shares the good news and subsequently, the Royal family converts to Christianity, gaining many followers. The narrative then depicts the persecution and martyrdom of St. Thomas, who is speared by the Embrans, the temple priests. The story concludes with the procession of St. Thomas's body to Chinnai Malai, now known as the Little Mount. Margamkali, ultimately illustrates the acceptance of Christianity and the martyrdom of St. Thomas. In contemporary times, this art form has evolved into a dance performance that transcends religious and caste boundaries, symbolizing a broader cultural and spiritual embrace.

The prototype of Margamkali is composed of 14 stanzas (padas) which are derived from Syrian and Tamil words, and they got to be included in its composition. There was a time when Syriac language was used as a trade language (*Lingua Franca*) in Kodungallur and its surroundings. At least from the fourth century, the Knanites as well as the rest of the Syrian Christians in Malabar used the Syriac language in their liturgical celebrations. They firmly believed that the Syriac language was sacred since Jesus Christ, his mother, and the Apostles used it, and the holy mass was instituted by Christ in that language. These were the reasons for the Syrian Christians of Kerala to maintain and use the Syriac language even in their cultural performances. The present day Margamkali songs have many Syriac liturgical words like maran (our Lord), alaha (God), mar thomma (St Thomas), malaka (angel), kandessa (Saint), ruha (spirit), nivyalanmar (prophets), Iso (Jesus), Mishihā (Christ) are seen in the lyrics. The Tamil words like meyu (body), peeli (dress). All these lead us back to an early period of the history of Malayalam literature, which had Tamil words aplenty. However, Persian and Portuguese words are not seen in the text. Interestingly,

there are many peculiar words and their usages have been utilized effectively in the text of Margamkali lyrics. Those words might possibly have been borrowed from Tamil because Margamkali has close affinity with the Cindu kind of song composition, which was popular in Tamil language during the period (Karimbunkalayil).

Margamkali is performed by dancing, singing and clapping around a sacred lamp *nilavilakku*, wearing the traditional white dhoti and blouse with a golden or red border. The lamp represents Christ and the performers as his disciples. The performance is usually held in two parts (“padham”) and begins with lyrics and dance movements narrating the life of St. Thomas, the apostle. Margamkali does not use any instruments other than two small palm size cymbals played by the same person who sings the song. As usual the song begins with a *Vandanageetham* or invocation. Though the opening lines may refer to Christian *mayilvahanam* (rider on peacock likened to the one astride a cherubim) Christ. The concluding portion distinctly calls upon St. Thomas to come, help and bless. The intermediate lines in the first stanza clearly indicate the venue, as well as the immigration of the Knanaya Christians; their colonization under the aegis of Thomas of Cana and Bishop Joseph of Ouraha (Edassa) and their jubilant wish to hold together forever without disintegration for which they expect the help of St Thomas. It is based on the activities of Thomas written by Burdusan of Ouraha of the 3rd century. Margamkali has a technique of its own and the training is given by the *Ashans* (Gurus) in the *Kalari*. The term *Kalari* is very much connected with the performing arts of Kerala especially the martial arts. It is taught from a thatched shed where the training is given to the disciples by the Gurus. Margamkali is

a vigorous dance form and is performed in a Thandava style. The dance starts with a Vandanaganam (invocation song). Vandanaganam is made mandatory for all performances and this is to invoke prayer mode to the performance. The steps are structured to favour the mood. The song goes like this:

Meykanintha piliyumayil  
melthonthum Meniyum, tei tei  
Pitintha daendum kayum meyum  
Enmanneykum vazhkave tei tei...

“The overall meaning refers to the immigration of the Knanites and their jubilant wish to stay together without disintegration for which they expect the help of St Thomas” (Velliyan 15). The lyrics of the songs are poetic in structure. Initial parts of the lyrics follow an oriental music or a Suriyani style and each line ends with Karnatic music style. “The antiquity of the Margamkali songs containing 14 stanza’s (padams) can be derived from the Syriac and Tamil words, which were included in its composition” (Velliyan and Choondal 11). Another popular song goes like this:

“You protected me without succumbing to sufferings  
That too becomes futile Oh! God  
The land of ‘Hind’ is inhabited with snakes  
And such deadly creatures  
No calendar day, no favorable time, no familiar speech  
Oh lord! The land is full of forests, you

Left me in this in this land of obscurity”

“The dead body is gracefully decorated

The dead is burned and buried like fish

When they are in combat they won’t trust even the children

And children too won’t consider their parents differently

In all other places, Oh Lord, these two

Other men remain the same

Christ responds:

“Such laments of Thomas when appraised

With the majestic presence, the lord Messiah (Christ) begins to say like this :

Don’t think deeply and worry as if you are alone in this troubled land

I am also there with you at all the places where you go

Human beings are living in ‘Hind’; don’t worry unnecessarily

All human beings , irrespective of creed, are struggling animals

Your words, your looks would lend you a helping hand with language

All your thoughts are my thoughts; don't make a distance  
in understanding that"

The choreography of this performance is developed in a circular formation. The lit lamp in the center is kept as the connecting point for all the dancers and they dance around this light. They never show their back to the lamp. The dancers make brisk aggressive movements from the midpoint till the end. When they hop and jump, which is very common and frequent, they always land on the ground facing the lamp. Margamkali music has a special characteristic of its own. Chummar Chundal, the well-known folklorist of Kerala, writes: "Margamkali Pattu was composed in popular metric patterns namely *Kakali*, *Unakakali*, *Misrakakali*. But the composition of the songs does not strictly conform to the rules of these metrical patterns. The music of Margamkali songs is akin to that of the chanting of Syrian liturgy. No musical instruments are used for providing accompaniment. The mode of chanting Syriac liturgy was adapted to Margamkali songs presumably because the songs were rendered by the Syrian Church choirs" (Velliyan and Choondal 20). The songs of Margamkali usually excite the audience as they capture the attention of the masses gathered to watch the performances. The dancers move according to the beats and gyrate according to the song sung by the performers. They confine themselves to strict movements, postures, jumps and play effortlessly with ease. Jacob Velliyan writes, "The spirit and melody of Margamkali, basically is in Dravidian tunes with a touch of Syrian chants. The initial and concluding invocations for divine help in these songs suggest their close resemblance to Vedic chants" (33). In recent years new trends of music and singing have crept into the Margamkali dance style. Indigenous musical forms such as *Vanchippattu* have been

introduced in the villages of Mallusery, Onamthuruthu. At times the *Mangalaganam* is also sung in the *Kummi* style.

Kerala society which is pluralistic in nature has opened up spaces for the inclusion and interpretation of Hindu, Christian and Syrian codes. Edward Shils, the sociologist, describes pluralism in his seminal work *The Torment of Secrecy* as “a system of many centers of power, many areas of privacy, and a strong internal impulse towards mutual adaptation among various spheres rather than the dominance or submission of any one to the others” (153). There should be a balance between the world which marks community identity and the wide universe as it describes the quality of pluralism that is sustained in Kerala. In the context of Kerala, this means that various religious and cultural communities coexist without any one group overpowering the others fostering mutual respect and adaptation without losing their individual identities. Each community preserves its own identity and traditions while also interacting and adapting to the others. The private world of Christianity is deeply connected to its religious customs, ethnic worldview, rituals, ecclesiastical life, and norms of endogamy, which determine the level of contact and intimacy among individuals and this world deeply relies on Jesus Christ and his teachings. In contrast, the public world of Christians in Kerala involves the social and political alliances with Hindu kings, acceptance of Hindu norms, cultures, awareness of status and adherence to customs related to food, language, and culture. The practices of both Christians and Muslims were in many ways syncretised and amalgamated from the relationship from the Hindu deities and mythologies. This was more like a political agenda that took a wider dimension in bringing a social change in the Indian subcontinent (Bayly 75). This balance

between maintaining a unique community identity and integrating with the wider societal norms is a hallmark of Kerala's pluralism. It allows different cultural and religious groups to coexist harmoniously, fostering mutual respect and adaptation without losing their individual identities. This illustrates how cultures in Kerala are hybrid, fostering various channels of interaction. Religious syncreticism played a crucial role in the formation and shaping of the identity of Christian communities in Kerala. The deeper engagement and associations with different religions led to the growth and influence of the adaptation of different cultures. Regarding cultural practices, the architectural styles of Hindu temples, traditions, and celebrations were integrated into Christian practices, leading to a deeper blending of various elements between these religions. In cultural representations like Margamkali, various elements from Hindu traditions were syncretized, creating spaces without religious boundaries. This syncretism is evident in the intricate actions and performances of this art form. However, practice allowed different religious communities to coexist and enrich each other through mutual adaptation and respect.

With the pluralistic tenor of the society of Kerala, different elements from different social groups are represented through different customary practices and it has brought about mutual coexistence by respecting the boundaries, separations and border lines. Over the course of time, this art form has been able to live and sustain its spirit, and also, at the same time, assimilate and include different aspects from other religious practices. While considering the ritualistic practices in Margamkali, there is the gradual and steady emergence of a kind of intermixing or hybridization of different cultures. Many of the practices that one experiences

by being part of Syrian Christianity are, in many ways, similar to those of the other religious groups. Kerala has a diverse caste structure that includes Pulayas, Nairs, Namboothiri Brahmins, Ezhavas, Jews, Muslims, Christians, and Buddhists. This intermix shows how different cultures are blended together in Kerala society. The migration of these people across the territorial borders and formation of different communities before and after colonization by the Western countries and the growth of trade and other practices ultimately resulted in the emergence of mixed cultures and hybrid cultural identities. The Portuguese influence on Syrian Christians along with the Hindu codes and Chaldean liturgical meters carried forward the prayer songs and the performance of Margamkali to unprecedented levels of hybridisation. Margamkali came out as an amalgamation of Indian cultures and western traditions.

Syrian Christians have been seen as part of the Hindu caste system in many anthropological studies. Syrian Christian groupings form part of the total segmentary caste system and are ranked on a par with the Hindu castes. In fact, this community defines itself as a jati or sub-caste. St. Thomas Christians typically followed the social customs of their Hindu predecessors, and the vestiges of Hindu symbolism could be seen in their devotional practices as well. When St. Thomas converted several Namboothiri Brahmin families to Christianity, this conversion was generally considered to mean the loss of caste status. Syrian Christians got segmented off from their parent caste group. St. Thomas Christian culture is largely derived from the Jewish, West Syrian, East Syrian communities and influences from Hindu communities, blended with local customs and later with elements derived from indigenous Indian and European colonial interfaces.

Chummar Choondal in his research article on *Folk Traditions of Kerala Christians* writes, "The ancient Christians of Kerala followed the tradition of Hindus almost in every respect, such as customs and manners, social organization, art and architecture, literature, cultural activities" (56).

### **Comparative Analysis of Margamkali Songs and Dance Forms**

The songs of Margamkali bear a resemblance to the traditional ballads of Hindu Malabar, such as Payannoor Pattu, and the ballads honoring Aromal Chekavar, the renowned Ezhava hero. These similarities extend to the miracle plays of Europe and the social amusements of ancient Babylonia. Several scholars have noted the parallels between Margamkali Pattu and the Yatrakkali Pattu of the Namboothiri Brahmins, suggesting that the former may have been composed in imitation of the latter. Critics have also observed that the gnostic dance rituals of the early church bear a resemblance to Margamkali. In both traditions, participants form a moving circle and sing in response to a leader positioned at the center. Although no direct historical connection between these dances can be established, their circular movements symbolize Christian expressions of unity and togetherness. This circular dance form serves as a sacred ritual, signifying the group's mastery over the space within the circle, symbolizing conquest and possession. Unlike the Hindu community, where dance forms often serve broader cultural functions, Margamkali is distinctly dedicated to reflecting religious unity and togetherness within the Christian community. Similarities can be observed between the positions and modes of performance in Margamkali and Thiruvathirakkali. Both art forms maintain a circular dance

movement, allowing performers to engage face-to-face, thus conveying the essence of their respective traditions. These art forms exhibit cultural adaptation without encroaching on the religious elements unique to each tradition. The performances begin with blessings invoked from a traditional lamp lit at the dance site. However, in Margamkali, the lamp features a cross on its top, while Thiruvathirakkali uses a lamp topped with a peacock or a traditional design. Regarding costumes, both art forms adhere strictly to the attire conventions of their respective communities, maintaining cultural and religious distinctiveness. A comparative analysis, thus, underscores the intricate connections and cultural exchanges between different dance traditions, highlighting Margamkali's unique role in expressing Christian religious identity and unity through its performance. It is also believed that the name Margamkali has been traced from Hindu counterpart Thiruvathirakali, a folk dance popularized in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. (Jayaprabha 72). Sangamkali shares history with it and it has been derived from Nambhoothiri Brahmins. 'Margam' which means path or solution in Malayalam is related to mythological salvation or finding a way. The phases of Margamkali can be related to the pre-colonial and postcolonial period where it was with St. Thomas's arrival and propagation of the principles of Christianity that the art form received sustenance to live and was able to pass on to generations.

A comparative framework also informs us that Margamkali has emerged as a result of complex interactions and experiences involving various ethnic and racial interfaces. Societies formed from such mixtures develop new material, psychological, and spiritual self-definitions. However, the process of cultural hybridity has historically

been fraught with challenges and controversies. For colonized peoples subjected to British rule, adopting British manners or cultural values often required suppressing their own cultural identities. This highlights the intrinsic essence of a culture, which always retains traces of its original form despite external influences. In any cultural experience, remnants of the original culture persist, leading to a process of assimilation. The cultures of both the colonized and the colonizer undergo significant assimilation, resulting in the incorporation of colonial elements into local traditions (Young 55). Margamkali exemplifies this process of colonial and cultural hybridization. It stands as a testament to the profound social impacts such cultural forms can have on society, emphasizing that they do not exist in isolation but are products of continuous cultural exchange and adaptation.

### **The Role of Hybridity in the Evolution of Margamkali**

Hybridity is one of the most widely employed and over disputed terms in postcolonial theory which has been applied across different domains of cultural research, theory, and criticism. The term is believed to have been brought into the context of language and culture by Homi K. Bhabha in his book *The Location of Culture* (1994). Bhabha shows how colonialism succeeds in transforming histories and understandings in cross-cultural relations. The rhetoric of hybridity is fundamentally associated with the effects of mixture (hybridity) upon identity and culture where the idea of performance becomes important when trying to analyze what exactly constitutes culture, race, or identity. This can be traced within the expression Margamkali too. There is an element of negotiation of cultural meaning when two respective cultures come into contact with each other and their

identities interact with one another. In his introduction to *The Location of Culture* Bhabha gives a clear definition of “cultural hybridization”, where he compares it with a stairwell:

The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy (4).

Cultural hybridity can emerge from the liminal space, where two different cultural entities overlap, to form a cultural assimilation that takes place where the space is free from the structural hierarchies of the entities themselves. The term hybridity can be used interchangeably, says Peter Burke, where he has looked up for some different terms like “creolization”, “syncretism”, “cultural mixing”, “glocalization”, “borrowing” and “cultural translation”. Bhabha’s term ‘mimicry’ is also a part of a larger concept of visualizing the postcolonial situation. According to Bhabha, mimicry is a very important feature in cultural forms and is an exaggerated copying of language, culture, manners and ideas. This exaggeration means that mimicry is repetition with difference and is a kind of resistance. When Christian culture

had to undergo encounters with Hindu culture there evolved the scope of discussing the concepts of hybridity and mimicry. (Bhabha). A new hybrid cultural form with a new Christian identity got formulated. Dance forms like Thiuvathirakali got adapted to Christian culture and therefore a new identity was generated out of hybridizing and mimicking indigenous cultural forms. Bhabha has encouraged a rigorous rethinking of nationalism, representation, and resistance that, above all, stresses the "ambivalence" or "hybridity" that characterizes the site of colonial contestation which actually produces imagined "constructions" of cultural and national identities (Bhabha).

Hybridity demonstrates how cultures come to be represented by processes of iteration and translation through which their meanings are vicariously addressed through an Other. It opens a space and channel of negotiation between or outside the boundaries and binaries that mixes identities and cultures. It brings an effect of multiple cultural attachments that can lead to a critical form of consciousness. Nikos Papastergiadis, in his book *The Turbulence of Migration* discusses three levels of hybridity which are interrelated. At the first level, hybridity refers to the visible manifestation of difference within identity as a consequence of the incorporation of foreign elements. At the second level, hybridity refers to the process by which cultural differences are either naturalized or neutralized within the body of the host culture. It is argued by Pieterse, that the degree to which this process of cultural mixture or hybridization has been consciously utilized has varied over time. And finally the third level of hybridity is based on the perspectives that have emerged in diasporic life. Papastergiadis argues, "unlike essentialist theories that claim that cultural identity is rooted

in a particular landscape and locked into atavistic values, the concept of hybridity was used to shift attention towards the acknowledgement of the process of mixture and the effects of mobility on contemporary culture” (87). This fact can substantiate the cultural hybridization that happened with art forms and customs of Margamkali.

Paul Jay states that, “All cultural forms are hybrid” (186). Fading identity can be a direct result of hybridity in culture that may lead to identity crisis both in the colonizing and colonized cultures. The idea of hybridity shows the new transcultural forms that arise from cross-cultural exchanges. It can be social, political, linguistic, and religious. It is not necessarily a peaceful mixture, for it can be contentious and disruptive in its experience. This is what happened with the art form Margamkali where experiences of several realities and intermixing developed a new identity and redefined this art form. Cultural practices like Margamkali can in no way remain as fixed and closed and never remain as unopened to changes and influences from other cultural forms from a place like Kerala. Art forms are subject to change and open for cultural transformations and they tend to invite and absorb the complexities of other cultures.

With the very process of cultural hybridization comes an appreciation of other cultures. Every cultural element is, in some way, hybridized with another culture. Our identities, cultures, and art forms do not need to be confined to a single discipline, cultural practice, or vocabulary to be valuable. A more hybrid understanding can alter our self-perceptions and preconceived notions. Even nations emerge from cultures, forming narrative constructions rooted in hybrid interactions and interconnections. We have attempted to explain the

emergence of Margamkali in Kerala society and to examine how this art form entrenched itself within the dominant regional Hindu culture. The interpretations of Christianity by the people of Kerala constitute a powerful mode of cultural expression and societal flexibility. The innovative fusion of historical ideas and detailed descriptions of Margamkali provides an excellent ethnography of the Syrian Christian community in Kerala. This work focuses on how Christianity not only survived but also sustained itself through an art form in a society where Hinduism has been the dominant culture since ancient times.

Every culture lives and makes its imprints on history by undergoing several forms of assimilation and hybridization. Hybridity is, in many ways, a subversive tool whereby the colonized people might challenge various kinds of oppression. Different cultures sustain themselves in the world by undergoing certain adjustments and modifications that are essential for self-preservation. In the analysis of a culture or an art form, at certain times we might often adjust our view or our thoughts for the growth and survival of an art form. The arrival of St. Thomas has had a vital role in the spread of Christian faith and belief. As a powerful artistic expression Margamkali has remained as the cultural facilitator of Syrian Christians, and was also able to remain as a cultural artifact without losing its vigor and essence.

When investigating the archival repositories in the churches of Kerala there are no substantial historical source materials to bring about clarity to the subject. We do know that the Church in India was under the Catholic missionaries of the East. But it is unclear whether the theological and Christological position of the Church of the East had any well

defined influence on the Christianity of the Malabar Coast. What we do know from the Indian historical sources, such as the copper plates, is that the Nasranis were once largely part of the castes of Hindu religion. There is no known monastic tradition in India which is a distinguishing feature of Nasrani Christianity. The church as an institution in India was Hindu in culture, Christian in religion and Syrian in Liturgy. C.V. Cheriyan's observation on the evolution of Christianity in Kerala goes like this: "It is evident that their life was strikingly similar to that of their Hindu brethren. Their customs and manners, life and culture conformed to the general pattern in the land where they lived. Hence, Christianity in Kerala developed as an essentially Indian religion while the votaries of that religion zealously guarded the fundamentals of their faith as the most treasured of their possession" (29).

### **Conclusion: The Future of Margamkali in a Hybrid Cultural Landscape**

This paper opens a platform to analyze and delineate the various aspects of Margamkali, delving into the significant changes this art form has undergone through its various phases of evolution. Originally rooted in the cultural activities of rural communities, where the entire village or local community participated, Margamkali has transformed in response to broader social and economic changes. This transformation mirrors a wider trend observed in local cultures across the country, where traditional, participatory cultural activities have become more entrepreneurial. While these activities are now more efficiently organized, they have often lost their age-old participatory character. This shift in cultural practices began even before globalization gained

policy support, which subsequently brought new dimensions of intercultural contact through advanced modes of communication and market openings. In contemporary Malayalam cinema, Margamkali performances by women have been integrated into portrayals of Christian weddings, highlighting the cultural significance and capturing the attention of modern spectators. This demonstrates how Margamkali continues to serve as a popular medium for mass communication, symbolizing Christian culture and social formation within Kerala.

Margamkali, once confined to the platforms of Syrian Christians, has transcended its communal and societal boundaries to become an integral part of Kerala's broader cultural landscape. This evolution can be analyzed through the theoretical framework of cultural hybridization, which provides both inductive and deductive insights into the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity, local practices, and global influences. Inductively, the evolution of Margamkali illustrates the organic process of cultural hybridization. By observing the integration of new elements into traditional practices, such as the incorporation of Margamkali in modern media and its performance by women, we can see how cultures adapt to changing social contexts. This adaptation is not merely a passive process but involves active negotiation and reinterpretation of cultural meanings. The historical layers of Margamkali—from its origins in Jewish, Brahmin, and Namboothiri traditions to its contemporary representations—highlight the resilience and flexibility of cultural forms. These forms evolve while retaining core elements that connect them to their roots. Deductively, applying the hybridization framework to Margamkali allows for a deeper understanding of how

cultural identities are constructed and reconstructed. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity, which emphasizes the fluidity and intersectionality of cultural identities, provides a useful lens for examining Margamkali. Bhabha's notion of the "third space" as a site of cultural negotiation is evident in how Margamkali has adapted to different social and cultural influences over time. This "third space" allows for the coexistence and blending of multiple cultural identities, challenging rigid boundaries and fostering a more inclusive cultural narrative.

Margamkali exemplifies this process, as it incorporates elements from various cultural and religious traditions, creating a unique hybrid form that resonates with a diverse audience. This hybridization process underscores the importance of cultural dialogue and exchange, where different traditions can interact and influence each other, leading to new cultural expressions and identities. It can certainly be argued based on the above analysis that the evolution of Margamkali is a testament to the power of cultural hybridization. This art form has not only survived but thrived by adapting to new contexts and incorporating diverse influences. Margamkali's journey from a communal tradition to a celebrated cultural symbol in Kerala highlights the dynamic nature of cultural identities and the ongoing process of cultural negotiation and hybridization. By embracing this hybrid identity, Margamkali continues to serve as a bridge between the past and the present, local traditions and global influences, and diverse cultural practices. As Kerala continues to evolve, Margamkali stands as a vibrant example of how cultural forms can adapt and flourish in a constantly changing world. Through its continued practice and adaptation, Margamkali will likely remain a significant cultural and social

touchstone, reflecting the hybrid nature of Kerala's cultural landscape.

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