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East Syriac language and ethnicity amongst St. Thomas Catholic Christians of Kerala

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Abstract: This article explores how East Syriac, the religious language of St. Thomas Catholic Christians in what today is the state of Kerala (India), became a key ethnic marker during the 16th and 17th centuries. It tracks the tensions sparked off by European missionaries, who tried to impose Latin as the principal language of religious services, leading the local clergy to develop a new relationship with the language their rite and deploy it as a marker of their religious, class and caste distinction. To make sense of how East Syriac went from being an irrelevant factor in the ethnic politics of these Christians to the key marker of difference, we develop a typology of religious languages, inspired by Peter Auer's typology of standard languages. Our principal theoretical claim is that an exoglossic religious language, even when competence in it is not widespread amongst the congregation or even the clergy, can still function as a strong marker of ethnic distinction. We explore how East Syriac was used – relatively successfully – to maintain the caste privilege of the clergy, as well as the status and the autonomy of the indigenous Indian Christian church.

Keywords: East Syriac; Thomas Christians; exoglossic religious language; Jesuits; Franciscans; caste

1 Introduction

Mār Guru Yohend (1920–2005), originally named Father John Bosco Thottakkara alias Punnoose Arkadiokan (Koonammakkal 2007: 338), was a monk of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (C.M.I.), the first indigenous Catholic religious order in India. He is fondly remembered by ardent churchmen as a dedicated proponent of the East Syriac language and liturgical tradition, both within the C.M.I. and the broader Syro-Malabar Catholic Church in Kerala. Yohend held that the East Syriac rite

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embodied the authentic, pre-colonial liturgical heritage of Christianity in Kerala, challenging the Latinized reforms introduced by Portuguese missionaries in the 16th–17th centuries. His choice of name reveals more complexities connected to Catholics in Kerala. He adopted the East Syriac priestly title *Mār* and the Sanskrit *Guru*, was called by the Malayalam word *Punnoose* (equivalent of Stephen or Esthapannose) and the Greek-derived *Arkadiokan* (from *αρχιδιάκονος*), often translated as archdeacon in English. Yohend appears to be a linguistic blend of two Aramaic terms: *Yohannan* (John) and *Hendwaya* (Indian).

Yohend's nomenclatural choices reflect centuries-old conflicts within the Christian Churches of Kerala with respect to the East Syriac language and liturgy.¹ Such conflicts have been in place since the opening decades of the 16th century, a period of seismic socio-political transformations caused by the arrival of the Portuguese royal representatives, traders and missionaries. This paper examines the complex trajectories of East Syriac within Kerala's Thomas Catholic² religious landscape in the 16th–17th centuries, a period characterized by sustained attempts by *Padroado*³ missionaries to replace Syriac with Latin.⁴

We investigate multiple roles of East Syriac as a liturgical medium, unifying element, rallying point and symbol of cultural heritage. To contextualize, the paper begins by conceptualizing it as an *exoglossic religious language*, meaning that it was foreign and unintelligible to the congregation, and possibly to most of the clergy. We then briefly review the genealogy of Kerala's Thomas Catholics and continue to map Syriac's shifting roles across socio-political contexts in the 16th and 17th centuries. Our data is drawn from the available correspondences of Franciscans, Jesuits,

1 East Syriac is a variety of Aramaic, a Northwest Semitic language that survives in the Near East, primarily in liturgical traditions. East Syriac, and the variety most closely related to it, West Syriac, also survive primarily as languages of sacred rites. Although closely related, some important isoglosses separate them, reflected even in the different pronunciations for the word denoting "God". Throughout history, some have also referred to East and West Syriac synonymously as Chaldean, while others reserved this name for only the former variety. This paper, however, concerns itself neither with the phonetic or grammatical features of these languages/dialects nor with the myriad ways they tended to be named, but only with regard to the symbolic value they had in the religious and political life of India's St Thomas (Syrian) Catholic church.

2 Catholics who believe their ancestors were Brahmins converted by St Thomas, the Apostle, in 52 C. E. They are variously known as Thomas Catholics, Syrian Catholics and Nazranis. Those who embraced Catholicism through Portuguese interventions are known as Latin Catholics. See Sreekumar and Eldhose (2024) for a succinct introduction.

3 *Padroado* was a system granted by the papacy which authorized Portugal to appoint bishops, create dioceses, and manage missions across Asia, Africa, and South America. See Neill (1984: 111–13), and Pallipurathkunnel (1982: 3–7).

4 Our focus is the Thomas Catholics (Syrian Catholics). Though the history and linguistic fabric of other denominations are equally interesting, they are left out because of space constraints.

Thomas Catholic prelates,⁵ and other contemporary sources as well as secondary literature on the deployment of Syriac in ethnic and religious politics.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how East Syriac continued to be a powerful marker of ethnic distinctiveness, despite being foreign and unintelligible to the congregation. We build upon Rajeshwari V. Pandharipande's concept of "functional transparency", a term developed to indicate the sociolinguistic situation wherein a certain linguistic form is clearly connected to concrete social functions. To this, we add how East Syriac remained linked to ecclesiastical and caste politics, in order to show how its potency to create ethnic difference came to play a central role in various spheres of life.

The paper continues in three sections. First, we lay out the theoretical framework that explores the potency of religious language to create ethnic difference. Second, we present the historical background of the Thomas Christians in Malabar from the early Portuguese interventions in the 16th century until the 17th century, when the Carmelite Order remained the primary missionary institution in Kerala. This is followed by conclusions and some guidelines for further research.

2 Language-religion-ethnicity triangle

The language of religion has long fascinated theologians, but linguists have shown little interest in it, often treating it as a stylistic variation of another language, rather than recognizing it as a distinct code (Pandharipande 2023).⁶ Even less common are attempts to connect religious language to forms of groupness (which can come under the name *ethnicity*, *identity*, *nationality*, *state loyalty*, etc.). Exceptions are migration and diaspora studies, where linguists are naturally more interested in questions of language maintenance in religious settings (Ding and Goh 2020; Dzialtuvaite 2006); sociologists evince greater interest in how religion and language interact and potentially contribute to the robustness of ethnic or national identity, assimilation versus integration and similar processes (Brubaker 2013; Safran 2008).

Ana Souza is one of the few to explicitly theorize about religious language in relation to ethnicity (Souza 2016a, 2016b). She presents the language-religion-groupness nexus as a triangle, arguing that each point could have strong or weak connections. For example, for a Malayali family living in an English-speaking

5 The data is drawn primarily from 16-volume *Documenta Indica*, containing Jesuit correspondence, as well as the first three volumes of *História das Missões do Padroado Português do Oriente* (see reference list).

6 Some do treat religious language as "religiolect" but confine their discussion mostly to certain variations in vocabulary and grammar within a larger dialect, cf. analysis of "Jewish Malayalam" (Gamliel 2017).

country, the link between the Malayalam language and ethnicity might be strong; contrastingly, for a Malayali family in Kerala, where Malayalam is the principal language of the majority, such a link is quite weak. However, under normal circumstances, the link between the language present in religious life (be it East Syriac, Latin, Arabic, or Sanskrit) and ethnicity can be expected to be much stronger for the latter than for the former family. As mentioned, our exploration of the 16th–17th centuries was a time of polarization between Latin and Portuguese on the one hand and East Syriac and the Thomas Christians on the other. However, since this was a period prior to nation-building, a ‘Malayali’ or ‘Indian’ identity was most probably non-existent; instead, ethnic distinctions were primarily shaped by regional, caste or kinship affiliations, along with religious identities.

Talking about South Asia specifically, the seminal 2006 publication “Explorations in the Sociology of Language and Religion” (Omoniyi and Fishman 2006), arguably the first to systematically gather knowledge in language-religion-ethnicity research, featured an article by Pandharipande (2006), which gives a useful overview of this region. Although her discussion of Christian denominations and Syriac specifically is limited to a few sentences, she coins the aforementioned term functional transparency. This concept can be used to evaluate the weakness or strength of Souza’s proposed identificational links between language, religion and ethnicity. To give an example, Malayalam is functionally transparent in indicating an ethnoregional identity within India today. However, it is a weak marker of religious identity, because it is used by all religious groups in Kerala. Conversely, East Syriac, although confined to narrow use within religious rites of the Thomas Catholics, is transparently functional for its role in religious rites and thus denotes ecclesiastical loyalty.

Importantly, users need not be fully competent in a linguistic variety for it to function transparently in social contexts. East Syriac is not the primary language of Kerala’s Thomas Catholics, and their clergy has been repeatedly accused by European missionaries of having little or no working knowledge of this Semitic tongue (a point to which we return below). Regardless of the facticity of such accusations, East Syriac has endured as a powerful marker of ethnic distinction, resisting repeated attempts at displacement by Latin, as we will demonstrate.

This leads us to a theoretical question largely unaddressed in scholarly literature: what is the causal mechanism that can imbue religious language with the potency to create communal feelings and ecclesiastical loyalties? This cannot be explained solely by the term functional transparency, which indicates correlations, rather than causal relationships. We cannot hope to answer this largely unaddressed question here, but only to provide indications that could be explored in further research. On the one hand, it could be posited – in an instrumentalist fashion – that language does not foster communal feelings at all, but that loyalties originate

through meaningful contacts (in communally informed spaces) and welfare services provided by the church. In this view, emotional attachment to language or rite is derivative of those abovementioned functions. On the other hand, the language of religion appears to have certain inherent attributes that enable it to foster feelings of attachment and a sense of belonging, irrespective of the institutional structure. The ones that have so far been noticed are:

1. Magical aspects, such as blessings and prayers (Pandharipande 2023: 359). These have the power to enact or invoke meaningful spiritual realities;
2. Aesthetic aspects; it is known that converts would often choose a new religion based on the purely sonorous aspects of the religious rite, which include singing, recitation, use of repetitions and rhythms (alongside other aesthetic concerns like architecture, cf. Kupari 2023);
3. Religious language has performative aspects, such as the proclamation of baptism or marriage, allowing, banning or commanding. These constitute illocutionary acts, according to J. L. Austin's philosophy of language (Austin 1962: 129), and they have been central in important social and (bio)political affairs (cf. Ray 1973);
4. Lastly, there is the choice of language to be used in rituals. We have not found any research that would compare or typologize different types of religious language.

It is on this fourth point that we wish to make our typological contribution. We propose a typology of ritual languages by intelligibility, inspired by Auer's (2005, 2011) sociolinguistic typology of exoglossic and endoglossic standard languages. Standard languages are always necessarily different both in form and functional range from vernacular varieties, but an exoglossic standard is fully foreign; it belongs to a different branch or entirely different family of languages, such as French is for the speakers of Breton in France. An endoglossic standard may be more or less distant from the vernaculars, but at least it belongs to the same language group, such as standard Italian, based on Florentine speech, is for Sicilians.

The choice of language in sacred rites, rituals or other religious events can be placed on a spectrum of intelligibility, with fully endoglossic language on the one extreme and fully exoglossic on the other. Protestant endoglossic ideologies are predicated on the idea that religious language should be fully understood by the participants, who could draw lessons from it. The linguistic ideology of the Bhakti movement, which challenged the monopoly of Sanskrit in religion and introduced regional languages into devotional poetry, can also be labelled endoglossic.⁷ Exoglossic religious languages are those which are not meant to be understood, but rather felt, the principal idea being that it represents a language of higher being(s).

⁷ Of course, the Bhakti movement did not constitute a rupture from the Sanskrit tradition, as Sheldon Pollock notes, since much Bhakti literature was written in Sanskrit (Pollock 2006: 423–436).

East Syriac in Kerala falls into the latter category, typologically similar to a situation wherein the language of ritual has little or no relation to the language of the believers, as was the case with Latin in Central Europe or Sanskrit brought by certain groups of Brahmins from North into South India.

Between endoglossic and exoglossic religious languages, several transitional sub-categories can be proposed. An endoglossic language may have evolved at a certain point in history, but its preservation in its original form renders it unintelligible to the congregation over time. Such cases include classical Arabic and Old Church Slavic, used performatively in religious rites, but understood only partially by speakers of modern Arabic and Slavic varieties. We can further differentiate between those communities where the learning of the religious language is encouraged (Arabic in Islam) and where it is not (Old Church Slavic) or even prohibited to certain groups of people (Sanskrit in the past). As a last sub-category, there can be an exoglossic standard that is nevertheless known by a part of the population as a second language, learned in special religious schooling. Arabic in non-Arab speaking Muslim societies or Hebrew amongst Jews outside Israel are examples. The typology is summarized in Table 1.

Students of nation-building and ethnicity have argued that endoglossic religious languages are more potent motors of groupness. Benedict Anderson famously argued that the printing of pamphlets and Bible translations encouraged a vernacularized religious literacy and thus functioned as a motor for creating “imagined communities” (Anderson 2006). This is corroborated by the fact that early national feelings emerged in those societies which had adopted Protestantism. Adrian

Table 1: Choice of religious language, typologized by intelligibility.

Type	A	B	C	D	E
	Fully endoglossic	Not fully endoglossic, but related and competency encouraged	Not fully endoglossic, related, competency not encouraged	Exoglossic, but competency encouraged	Exoglossic and competency not encouraged
Examples	All Protestant societies, Arabic and Old Church Slavic in their beginnings, Hebrew in Israel	Classical Arabic in modern Arab-speaking countries	Old Church Slavic in Orthodox Slavic majority societies, Koine Greek in Greece	Arabic in Pakistan, Somalia, etc. Hebrew amongst Jewish diaspora	East Syriac in Kerala (in the past), Latin amongst African Catholics

Hastings similarly argues that the English imagined themselves as God's chosen people through their translations of the Bible and a distinct Anglican church (Hastings 1997). He then argues that classical Arabic is a weak tool of nation-building because it is not understood by most of the Muslim believers (for a similar argument, see Kamusella 2017), and this explains the late emergence of national feelings amongst the Arabs, through modernization, rather than religious-linguistic solidarity.

Should this, then, imply that exoglossic religious languages are inherently inferior in creating ethnic distinction? We argue that intelligibility is not the criterion by which their power and impact should be assessed. Exoglossic standards will be shown to be powerful motors of groupness, taking East Syriac as a case in point. Owing to the lack of previous research, we can only speculate about the causality. We will assume that when the rite is conducted in ancient, unintelligible tongues, it evokes a sense of authority, aura, mystery, numinosity and a connection with the distant past. East Syriac is claimed to be the language of Jesus Christ; exposure to and familiarity with it – in ritualized form – can bring the members of the congregation into vicarious contact with their putatively ancient, sacred roots. It is imbued with a magical quality that can have the effect of displacing the participants in the ritual from the dominant temporal regime. This creates a sense of unity through an otherworldly experience. Such religious language, when combined with the above mentioned social, magical, performative, and aesthetic factors, endows believers with the potency to build robust faith communities. This is not to suggest that intelligible, endoglossic religious language cannot have the same effects, but we suspect they will be qualitatively different.

Our study does not, however, focus on the micro-interactions within the church community itself. It assumes the form of a historical narrative demonstrating how East Syriac liturgical language was successfully accommodated to perform functions in the politics of religion amongst the Thomas Catholics of Kerala in the 16th–17th centuries. We specifically show how this liturgical language evolved from being a relatively marginal factor in the formation of ethnicity to a central tool of marking ethnic distinction that was used to resist the changes that the European missionaries and colonial powers tried to force upon the local Christians.

3 East Syriac in 16th and 17th century Kerala

This section is divided into six parts. First, we present what we know of the history of the Syriac Christians prior to the arrival of the Portuguese missionaries. Second, we describe the activities of the Franciscans, who were generally hostile to East Syriac. Third, we turn to Jesuits, who encouraged the learning of East Syriac, even as they

were pushing for Latinization of the Thomas Christians. Fourth, we analyse the discussions around Syriac in the 1585 Third Ecumenical Council of Goa and the 1599 Synod of Diamper. Fifth, we turn our attention to the 17th century and the aftermath of the Synod. Sixth and last, we look more closely at the relations of the Carmelite Order to East Syriac.

3.1 Portuguese missionary jolt

The arrival of the Portuguese to Kerala (Malabar) in 1498 was a turning point in the history of local Christianity and the entire region. Incentivized by a combination of mercantile-religious aspirations, the Portuguese considered evangelization of natives “a governmental and national responsibility” (Brown 1956: 12). Christianity in Kerala is traditionally believed to have originated in 52 C.E., when the Apostle St. Thomas is said to have converted high-caste Brahmins to the faith. Another view ascribes the arrival of Christianity to the enterprise of merchants and missionaries of the East Syrian or Persian Church (Mundadan 1989: 21) between the 4th and 9th centuries. For the next few centuries, this Christian community is sporadically but authentically mentioned in historical sources, alongside records of migratory Christian groups arriving from the Middle East (Joseph 1929; Kuriakose 2011). By 1500 C.E., Christianity in Kerala had firmly adopted East Syriac liturgical practices, a process that may have been completed centuries earlier through a prolonged interaction between the Kerala cultural context and the Syrian (also called Chaldean or Persian) ecclesiastical system. Certain historians hold that the Thomas Christians had developed their own liturgy (Pulikkunnel 1997: 37) which was later supplanted by East Syriac liturgy, and that these Christians kept close ties to the Syrian Church, upon which they depended for its prelates and rite (Mundadan 1989: 193).

In the pre-Portuguese era, theology and language played a relatively minor role in defining the Christian religious community; it was rather their endogamous practices that gave them the position of a high-caste group within the broader Malabar community (Thomas 2021; Visvanathan 1995). These Christians maintained a “narrow, exclusive concept of community”, performing social rites and ceremonies of high castes with some Christian interpretations (Kollaparambil 1981: 3–4). Some go as far as to claim that pre-colonial St. Thomas Christianity cannot be considered a religion in a strict sense, as its beliefs were understood as a “path”, i.e. a way of life, in a manner similar to that in which Buddhists and Jains were embedded in a broader caste-based Hindu society (Abraham 2022: 25). What attests to this fact is that, during the Portuguese regime in Kerala, the Thomas Christians would send aspiring Christians from lower castes to the Portuguese for baptism, and after baptism, they would not admit them to their own churches nor have any relations with them

(Thekkedath 1982: 22–23) so that the former’s social standing would remain intact (cf. Bayly 1989: 243–253 and Rae 1892: 183–84, for a discussion of this status).

The thesis that the Thomas Christians were more of an endogamous caste than a community joined by religious doctrine or linguistic practice is corroborated by some other facts. Their bishops were Nestorians, normally sent from Seleucia-Ctesiphon and later Baghdad, distinguished from the local population by their fair complexion, West Asian appearance and colourful vestments, as well as a lack of competency in Malayalam. Contemporary observers noted that most members of the church were ignorant of their catechism, and literacy was limited to reciting the Lord’s Prayer and the Ave Maria in Syriac without understanding their meaning (Thekkedath 1982: 25).

The Jesuits later made similar claims. Georgius de Castro stated in 1574 that Thomas Catholic priests “only know how to read it [East Syriac] but they do not understand it” (DI VII: 751, our translation).⁸ Alessandro Valignano wrote in 1577 that “four or five of them understand something in Chaldean [Syriac], all the others know how to read and write in Chaldean, but do not understand or speak it, and they pray and perform mass in Chaldean like the blind” (DI X: 882). On another occasion, Valignano emphasized the poor competency of Kerala priests in Syriac as one major reason behind the errors and superstitions prevalent among Thomas Christians (DI XIII: 177). Jerónimo Xavier in 1589 commented that the local priests “know little [Syriac], because they have no [formal] studies but only the [oral] tradition passed from old clerics to young men” (DI XV: 205). In 1593 Antonio Toscano wrote: “The priests in this Sierra [Malabar] ... are all ignorant, and even their Archbishop knows nothing more than how to properly understand the Syriac language, along with two priests who also have a mediocre knowledge of this Syriac language but they are without any formal education or understanding of matters of conscience, nor do they have books” (DI XVI: 599). We come back later to the question of how true such accusations may have been. The fact that the Bible was in Syriac⁹ accentuates the insularity that has pervaded the Thomas Christian community and thus enabled Syriac to remain a non-contentious language.

Based on the available sources, it makes most sense to claim that the inability to perceive, or indifference to, theological differentials, coupled with the socio-cultural existence as a privileged group, created a pragmatic rather than doctrinally exacting approach among the Thomas Christians towards religious language in pre-colonial times, even as they consciously preserved its ritual functions for communal

8 “DI” hereinafter stands for all the volumes (in Roman numerals) of *Documenta Indica*. All translations, unless noted otherwise, are our own.

9 The first Malayalam translation of the Bible was the Ramban Bible (1811), translated by Philipose Ramban and other Syrian Christian priests from the Syriac version.

continuity. Syriac was not imbued with deep emotional-symbolic significance beyond its ritualistic function, and it remained largely unquestioned and unchallenged within sacred spaces, with no role in secular transactions. In the absence of external pressures, Syriac continued to serve as an integral and non-contentious element of worship, rather than a cause for communal mobilization. This would change when the Portuguese began pushing for Latinized religious services.

The arrival of the Portuguese in Malabar brought unprecedented economic resources, military support, and Catholic religious orders: Trinitarians, Franciscans, Dominicans, Jesuits and Augustinians. It also marked the beginning of the process of colonization, which eventually saw European powers taking control of trade and many resources.¹⁰ However, the initial interactions between Thomas Christians and the Portuguese were relatively harmonious. They expressed trust in the Portuguese, supplicating Vasco da Gama in 1502 to save them from Gentiles and Muslims, even requesting the Portuguese Admiral to assume sovereign rule over them (Rego 1949: 386; Trindade 1964: 329–330). That the Portuguese and the Thomas Christians together went on a pilgrimage to the tomb of the Apostle St. Thomas in Mylapore in 1517 testifies to their mutual camaraderie (Ferrolí 1939: 102).

Some specific factors contributed to this partially peaceful phase (which was still fraught with conflict over doctrine, as will be demonstrated below). Geographically, early Portuguese religious activities remained largely within the confines of Portuguese-controlled settlements whereas most Thomas Christians lived in hinterlands. Moreover, it was with Portuguese navigators, traders, and admirals (who were indifferent or incompetent to identify differences in belief) that the Thomas Christians mostly interacted (Mundadan 1989: 283). The general ignorance of the Thomas Christians regarding theological divisions within Christendom also may have fostered warm relations with the Portuguese, as their sense of identity was rooted more in the simple knowledge that they were Christians (Neill 1984: 327, 332) than in doctrinal exactitude. As Duarte Barbosa commented at the beginning of the 16th century, the Thomas Christians “had not any Christian doctrine amongst them, ... they held and believed the faith of Christ in a gross manner” (Barbosa 1866 [1521]: 162). On their part, the Portuguese had only scanty knowledge about local Christians (Ferrolí 1939: 101), which created an epistemic buffer zone between the two groups.

As the early missionaries mostly did not speak or understand Malayalam, they generally transacted business through interpreters, precluding chances to discuss

¹⁰ Malekandathil (2003; 2004) advances the thesis that it was exactly the desire for controlling resources that propelled most Portuguese missionary actions, implying that their primary goals were connected to colonization, rather than the spreading of doctrine and the Catholic faith. This thesis is highly relevant to scholars of colonialism; however, we are not putting it to test in this paper, as we are primarily interested in the potency of religious language in sustaining communities of faith.

religion. But things would change soon. Though the Franciscans studied Malayalam with some success (Rego 1951: 406–407), it was the Jesuits who made linguistic leaps. Melchior Balthasar Nunes observed that a command of Malayalam enabled him to interact with the Thomas Christians with reasonable effectiveness; he subsequently explored their hinterlands in 1557 and 1561 (DI II: 562–563).¹¹ The Jesuits' efforts to learn of Malayalam, however, proved to be a prolonged and complex process (DI VII: 687, X: 882–883; XIII: 284, 430–431, XIV: 804). After 1585, some of them learned Syriac too, further straining relations, and prompting the Jesuits to increasingly critique what they perceived to be an alarming number of “heresies” and “errors” in the Syriac books they could now read.

Probably what the Portuguese interpreted as heresies and errors were only the differences in customs, practices and rituals (Malekandathil 2003: XXIV) which had ossified over the centuries through the interplay between the local milieu and Syrian connections, creating a church that was “Indo-Dravidian in culture, Christian in religion, Oriental in worship” (Kollaparambil 1981: 9). Missionaries also soon took issue with the East Syriac language used in the rites of the Thomas Christians, as with the rite itself. We continue our examination of language conflicts by analyzing the interactions of the Franciscans, Jesuits, and Carmelites, as well as the role of the Synod of Diamper, in shaping the Catholic Thomas Christian community of Kerala.

3.2 The Franciscans

The Franciscans were the most numerous and influential missionaries during the first half of the 16th century in Kerala. They, despite their freedom to enter the shrines of Thomas Christians, “denounced almost instantly their rites, liturgies and religious dogmas and demanded that they be reformed with the help of competent clerics and priests” (Županov 2005: 297) and this intervention directly affected Syriac. For example, the Franciscan Simão de Guimarães, who came to Malabar with Pedro Álvares Cabral in 1500, started expurgating Syriac books (Mundadan 1989: 290), anticipating Jesuits' actions of a larger scale discussed below.

The actions of the Franciscans did not entirely alienate the Thomas Christians, partly because their numbers were small and their influence largely confined to limited coastal regions, without extending into the hinterlands where most Thomas Christians lived. This restricted sphere of influence helps explain the relative harmony that marked Portuguese–Thomas Christian relations during the early decades of the sixteenth century. However, this situation began to change in 1517 – the same

¹¹ Introduction to DI III locates the beginning of Jesuits' expansion to the Thomas Christians.

year the Thomas Christians joined the Portuguese on a pilgrimage – when thirteen Franciscans arrived (Malekandathil 2004: 92).

Overall, the Portuguese attempts at religious and mercantile integration must have ruffled the Thomas Christians who defined themselves as part of age-old cultural conventions. Though Mar Jacob, bishop of the Thomas Christians (1502–1552), started administering sacraments according to Latin practices, others differed. The Persian bishop Mar Denha emerged as a figure of resistance offered by the Thomas Christians against the aggressive interventions of missionaries like Alvaro Penteado, who had “acquired ill-fame and provoked suspicion and distrust among the Christians and their indigenous priests” (Županov 2005: 297)¹² by his attempts to dethrone the Syriac language and the East Syriac rite. Mar Denha declared Penteado unfit to work among Thomas Christians as Penteado insisted on using Latin texts (Rego 1949: 395). Many broken promises and duplicity on the part of the Portuguese (Mundadan 1989: 290–303, 305–313) also catalysed this resistance. The errors that men like Penteado sought to remedy were simony, ignorance, marriage and/or concubinage of priests, dirty churches, and trade carried out by priests (Ferroli 1939: 104).

Following the death of Mar Jacob and Mar Denha, the Thomas Christians remained without bishops from 1552 to 1556. This episcopal lacuna almost coincided with the nascent attempts of the Jesuits to understand the Thomas Christians and their increased efforts to convert lower caste groups.¹³ In the same period, Franciscans like Fernando da Paz tried to wean the Thomas Christians off their ancient customs (Rego 1949: 386; Thekkedath 1982: 35) and to Latinize their rites by forbidding Syriac language and rite and by prohibiting married priests from celebrating Mass (Kollaparambil 1981: 18). Alongside these developments, the missionaries sent some youngsters from the Thomas Christian community to the University of Coimbra in Portugal, who returned as zealous advocates of Latinization. One of them, Mathew Diaz, wrote in 1550 to the King of Portugal highlighting the errors of his own people and extolling the “great diligence and fervour” of the aforementioned Fr. Penteado (DI II: 412–13). The Bishopric of Cochín, established in 1557, also adopted the Franciscan line of Latinization. Its first bishop, the Dominican Jorge Temudo believed that imparting Latin to the native priests was important in effecting “the perfect union of this [Thomas Christians] church with the whole church catholic and universal” (Geddes 1694: 101), and achieving greater control over them (DI VI: 427–428).

The opening of Franciscan seminaries was an intensified attempt directed against East Syriac. Right at the beginning of the 16th century the Franciscans founded a seminary in Cochín but information about it is scanty (Malekandathil 2004: 87). What precipitated mistrust and resentment among the Thomas Christians

¹² The ill-reputation acquired by Penteado was phenomenal; Ferroli (1939: 103–104).

¹³ See Tharayil (2003) for these efforts.

was the establishment of St. James Seminary at Kodungalloor (Crangannore) in 1540 by Vincent de Lagos, under the guidance of Goa's bishop, Juan de Albuquerque (1538–1553) and with the support of the local Portuguese captain João Pereira. Its "aim was to raise [Thomas Christian youths] as priests who would then return to their communities to preach the true doctrine, gradually guiding their fellow Christians away from their errors and towards obedience to the Pope" (Trindade 1964: 332).

Many Thomas Christians sent their sons to St. James. In 1549 it had more than eighty students (Kollaparambil 1981: 19) and in 1551, the Portuguese Viceroy D. Afonso de Noronha described the seminary as "well managed, and the devotion during the Mass they celebrated was so great" (Rego 1951: 4). By 1562, in addition to the Thomas Christian students, there were children of Latin Catholics of Portuguese parentage (Thekkedath 1982: 35). The highest appreciation of the seminary came from St. Francis Xavier who in 1549 described it as "very handsome" and "a fine College" and its founder as having done "wonderful work" in propagating faith (Coleridge 1872: 90).

Despite the quality of education, the seminary soon became a contested locus as it excluded Syriac from its curriculum. The Franciscans must have believed that they should expunge the East Syriac language in order to alter the worldview of the Thomas Christians. Such a belief implied that the college would churn out Latinized native clergy. But the omission of East Syriac sparked off deep anxieties amongst St. Thomas Christians about the erosion of their cherished traditions.

The most conspicuous form of resistance against this intrusiveness of European missionaries was a blend of caste and language. The Thomas Christians rejected the priests trained at St. James Seminary on the grounds that they lacked proficiency in East Syriac. Kollaparambil portrays this resistance as a spontaneous reaction against the newly appointed priests who were more zealous than their European mentors in enforcing Latin customs among the local people (Kollaparambil 1981: 18). To the Thomas Christians the priests educated in Portugal were ardent advocates of Latinization, who served as loyal agents of the Portuguese Crown and operated under the authority of the Bishop of Goa (Mundadan 1989: 329). Such priests eventually joined the bishopric of Cochin, which was established in 1557 (which mainly consisted of neophytes from lower caste strata), or enrolled in religious orders (Trindade 1964: 335–36).

The subtext of resistance via language might well have been the following: to the Thomas Christian priests, East Syriac was a passkey to their elite, high caste space and those who were ignorant of it were seen as belonging to lower social arenas. Caste and language thus increasingly came to signify two principal coordinates of Malabar Christianity as opposed to the Portuguese-imposed ones. It is possible that already at this stage, Latin became associated with foreign intruders, an emergent

class of priests and lower caste converts, while East Syriac came to index the traditional higher caste and the autonomy of the Thomas Christians.

In terms of the typology presented in Table 1, Latin was a partially endoglossic language for the Portuguese missionaries, while for the Thomas Christians, both Latin and Syriac were exoglossic. But the former was connected to external intrusion and religious practices wholly new and foreign, while the latter bore the mark of ancient customs, the language of the saviour and – no less important – elite exclusivity. Summarizing the available insights on the Franciscan involvement in Thomas Christians' affairs, it is clear that their seminary and the priests trained there came to be perceived as a threat by the Thomas clergy, who began to use language as a pretext for rejecting their ministry as unacceptable. Thus, an ethno-symbolic attachment to East Syriac could have its origins – at least amongst some of the Thomas priests and laity – in this period. Based on theory, we can assume that changing the language would have been perceived as having a direct effect on the magical and aesthetic aspects of tradition that are not to be tampered with. However, it is possible that the new sentiments towards Syriac arose only amongst those who came into contact with the Franciscans, while the majority of Thomas Christians in the hinterlands were still unaffected.

3.3 The Jesuits

It was into this space of linguistic and caste-based tensions that the Jesuits who “creatively reinterpreted Christianity in order to accommodate it to non-Christian peoples and cultures” (Županov 2005: 284) entered Malabar in the 1540s. No sooner had they arrived than they noticed the superior social standing of the Thomas Christians. Gomes Vaz in 1576 stated that the Thomas Christians were strategically important because of their numerical strength and social stature, and would serve as a gateway to the conversion of higher castes (DI X: 753). Franciscus Dionysius in 1578 wrote that apart from facilitating conversion to higher castes, unification of Thomas Christians would bring “profit to the Kingdom of Portugal because these Christians commonly have all the pepper in their power, with which the ships that go to the Kingdom are loaded” (DI XI: 67).

In 1550 the Madre de Deus (Mother of God) Church of Cochin was repurposed as a seminary with the same name, which eventually became the Jesuits' main centre for ecclesiastical training and learning in Kerala (Malekandathil 2004: 87). To streamline religious integration, they transferred this institution to Vaipicotta in 1587 with a view to attracting more Thomas Christians, rigorously instructing them in Catholic doctrines, and instilling Latin sensibility in the new clergy. The seminary functioned also as “a think-tank and intelligence centre from which the Jesuits and their

students were sent on particular missions in the neighbouring states or other St. Thomas Christian settlements” (Županov 2005: 315). Unsurprisingly it soon emerged as a theatre of linguistic and liturgical tug-of-war between the Thomas Christians and the Jesuits.

The Jesuit seminary, unlike its Franciscan predecessor, was quadrilingual: the Jesuits learned Malayalam while the Thomas Christians studied Syriac, Latin and Portuguese (DI XIV: 803–804). This aligned with the broader Jesuit strategy of learning vernacular languages while at the same time adhering to the Counter-Reformation principle that holy texts should not become endoglossic, i.e., not to be translated into the vernacular. It was also the ideology held by prominent Jesuits such as Vīramāmunivar (or Constanzo Beschi), who, despite his fluency in Telugu, Sanskrit and Tamil, maintained that holy texts need to be interpreted by knowledgeable persons like himself rather than printed in the vernacular and distributed (Blackburn 2006: 41–58).

It seems logical to suggest that the Jesuits’ decision to include Syriac in the curriculum stemmed from three considerations. One, they had learned from the Franciscans’ mistake and as a practical measure offered Syriac so that the Thomas Christians trained there would be better received, leading to greater cementing of Catholic doctrines. In fact, the Jesuits attributed the poor results achieved by the Franciscans to the use of Latin in the ecclesiastical ceremonies (Trindade 1964: 348). Second, they had also probably realized that the exoglossic Syriac, glorified as the language of Jesus Christ, was the source of the sacred authority of the Syrian Bishops and native priests (Županov 2005: 306–307). Valignano, for instance, found that knowing Syriac bestowed great acceptance among Thomas Christians (DI XIV: 661–62, 672–673) and Jerónimo Xavier claimed Thomas Christian priests feared Francis Roz, a Jesuit, because he had mastered Syriac better than them (DI XV: 205). Third, they had gauged the extent to which Latin was viewed and resisted as an intruder’s language.

This, however, did not resolve all the problems. Although Syriac was used as the medium of priestly formation, the students were brought up in the Latin rite. This language-liturgy hybridity strained relations between the Jesuits and some prominent Thomas Christians further. The dialectics between Syriac and Latin became multi-layered and complicated and Jesuits were not unanimous on how to approach the issue. Some considered Syriac books as the source and storehouse of heresy (DI XVI: 560), and implied their destruction was necessary, while others thought their complete removal was unfeasible given its ancient and entrenched nature (DI XI: 800). Mar Abraham, the archbishop of the Thomas Christians from 1565 to 1597, described it as a language which his flock “cherish owing to its antiquity in their ecclesiastical matters” (DI XI: 827–828).

The Jesuits appreciated Syriac's practical value but held that the authentic and true language of the church was Latin. Thus, Petrus Luís in 1580 suggested that in order to befriend Thomas Christians, it was necessary to educate youngsters from the congregation in Rome or to appoint a Jesuit who had mastered Syriac as the bishop of Malabar (DI XII: 180). Valignano thought that by teaching Latin to Thomas Christians "they become what they should be" (DI XII: 837–838). He also observed: "If the clergy [of Thomas Christians] were to learn the Latin language, they could be aided and taught by our members, thereby eliminating ignorance and errors, even if a Chaldean [Syrian] were to remain bishop" (DI XIII: 430–431). In short, the Jesuits had a complicated relationship with Syriac. On the one hand, they denigrated it as an impediment in fully integrating Thomas Christians with Rome; on the other, they were aware of its potency to imbue power and authority, and therefore tried to master it.

Apparently, no one recognized the potential dangers of the Jesuits' teaching, and mastering Syriac in the process, more accurately than Mar Abraham. Jeronimo Xavier's statement that "both he [Mar Abraham] and his clerics were more favourable to us [Jesuits] when we dealt with Latin and nothing more" (DI XV: 205) shows that Mar Abraham was apprehensive of the Jesuits' growing command of Syriac and its implications for ecclesiastical authority. What disturbed the archbishop was not the push for Latinization, as it is often maintained (Tisserant 1957: 45), but the fear of losing Syriac-derived power and authority. It is true that some Jesuits tried to displace Syriac and that Pope Gregory XIII (1502–1585) endorsed East Syriac by declaring "it was fitting for the beauty of the Church that her children should praise God in various languages" (DI XV: 206). This does not, however, seem to have made the archbishop or his clerics happy or relieved, contrary to what Kollaparambil argues (1981: 34). Rather, it is possible that the Jesuits would have reinforced a sense of communal insularity and power had they distanced themselves from the East Syriac tradition and sought simply to exclude it from the ecclesiastical spaces shared by the clergy and laity of the St Thomas Christians. That the Jesuits accused Mar Abraham of preventing Thomas Christians from sending their children to the Vaicotta seminary (DI XV: 666–667) and refusing to ordain priests trained at this institution (DI XV: 205; 390–391) indicates the extent and nature of his resistance.

The incidents that took place in connection with the Franciscan and the Jesuit seminaries reveal a pattern: as long as they remained within Cochin proper, the coastal area where the Thomas Christians were weak, things remained more or less cordial. It was when these religious orders sought to tamper with the delicate positioning of East Syriac and to penetrate core Thomas Christian constituencies that relations soured. The second factor that strained their relations was, again, caste. That the Jesuits' position towards caste was dynamic, ambivalent and often contradictory, made the situation more emotionally loaded.

The Jesuits favoured elites – wealthy merchants, kings, and learned Brahmins – because their ideals were shaped by late medieval chivalric conceptions, which were infused into Jesuit principles by their founding fathers, many of whom were from Iberian lesser nobility (Županov 2005: 289). Accentuating the centrality of caste, Melchior Nunes Barreto in 1566 recommended that to improve the prospects for converting higher castes “the freedoms and status the Christians had as Gentiles be preserved, so they do not lose them upon becoming Christians” (DI VI: 698–699). However, the Jesuits also intensified conversions from lower castes in the 1550s, and this coincided with the influence that the Jesuits began to increasingly exert over the Thomas Christians. Notwithstanding the Jesuits’ aforesaid equivocations, this convergence – increasing conversions and greater influence over Thomas Christians – necessitated a common ecclesiastical space and incurred the wrath of Thomas Christians who refused to have any truck with lower-caste neophytes.

In sum, the 16th century witnessed sometimes amiable, sometimes tense relations between Thomas Christians and the European clergy, represented first by the Franciscans and then by the Jesuits. The issues at stake were intersectional: religious, commercial, ethnic and political interests got intertwined into an intricate network. Towards the end of the century, the linguistic issue had gained a prominence it had never previously had as a way of differentiating traditions, asserting difference and signifying superiority. It is somewhat difficult to assess exactly when this occurred. Writing in 1577, Valignano stated that the Thomas Christians “are very attached to their Chaldean [East Syriac] language and believe that any attempt to teach them Latin is an effort to separate them from the governance of their Armenian [Syrian]¹⁴ prelates and place them under the jurisdiction of our Portuguese bishops, something they absolutely refuse to accept” (DI X: 882). This statement can, of course, be interpreted as Valignano’s opinion or as referring to only some of the priests. However, the Third Ecumenical Council (1585) and Synod of Diamper (1599) leave no doubt as to what kind of symbolic power East Syriac had acquired for the Thomas Christians by the end of the 16th century.

3.4 Third Ecumenical Council and Synod of Diamper

There occurred two complementary developments which stirred passions amongst the Thomas Christians in the closing decades of the 16th century. One: Jesuit scholars,

¹⁴ “Armenian” was frequently used by the Jesuits to signify Christian clergy from West Asia – including bishops from Syria – due to a mix of misunderstanding and conflation, as they often did not know the distinctions between Eastern Christian traditions. For an account of different names for the East Syrian church, see Mundadan 1989: 79–80.

after learning Syriac (as Mar Abraham had feared), began to peruse books of the Thomas Christians and found remnants of Nestorian theology which called for corrections. Two: the Third Ecumenical Council (1585) in Goa, where Mar Abraham abjured his errors, professed the Catholic faith, promised to reform his church, and pledged to surrender all “heretical” books (Trindade 1964: 347–48).

In a manner of speaking the Council indirectly acknowledged the supremacy of Syriac: it decreed to get the Latin breviary and missal translated into Syriac, together with essential parts of the ritual and pontifical (Tisserant 1957: 45), not to remove Syriac altogether. Francis Roz was appointed to help Mar Abraham carry out the reforms, including the correction of Syriac books. But the archbishop neither corrected the Syriac books nor cooperated with the Jesuits in the process. This prompted Valignano to disparage him as “a cunning fox” who was “not very Catholic, outwardly compromising while inwardly not cooperating” (DI XIV: 661–662). Jeronimo Xavier called him a “wicked prelate” (DI XVI: 246). The most powerful indictment of Mar Abraham originated from Francis Roz in the 1586 treatise *De Syrorum orientalium erroribus* (On the errors of the Eastern Syrians) (see Mecherry 2022: 187–221).

We can identify three reasons behind Mar Abraham’s defiance. One: being a Syrian bishop, he was emotionally attached to Syriac. Two: he thought that the corrections to holy texts amounted to sacrilege. It will be remembered that languages like Hebrew, Latin, Syriac, Arabic and Sanskrit are believed to have magical properties which are lost in translation or alteration. Three: he correctly understood the supreme importance that his priests and flock had attached to Syriac and the East Syriac rite. He had no difficulty in re-ordaining priests of the Thomas Christians as demanded by the European Catholics (Trindade 1964: 348), but when it came to Syriac, he hardened his position by trying to prevent Jesuits from accessing the holy language and refusing to ordain priests trained at the Jesuit seminary as best as he could. This gesture confirms his fear that the repositioning of Syriac would be detrimental to the interests of himself and his clergy.

For most Thomas Christians, however, the Jesuits’ continued use of Syriac in liturgy and ecclesiastical training was not a cause of insecurity but a salve which eased their anxieties and bolstered confidence. Unlike their priests and prelate, the laity had no power and authority to lose. To them, liturgical reforms did not incite animosity as long as the changes were articulated in East Syriac and endorsed by their Syrian bishops (Kollaparambil 1981: 18). The very presence of East Syriac was reassuring to them. Thus, we can claim that East Syriac had, towards the end of the 16th century, already become at least one of the key planks in the formation of what can now be called a Thomas Christian Catholic ethnicity. This is confirmed by the subsequent events at the Synod of Diamper in 1599.

The Synod, convoked by the Archbishop of Goa, Aleixo de Menezes, brought all Thomas Christians under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of Rome through the

Portuguese *Padroado*. The native priests largely accepted the doctrinal formulas proposed by Menezes. Despite their acceptance of these formulas, they protested against the demand to abandon the East Syriac rite (Tisserant 1957: 58). Ultimately, a compromise was reached, whereby the Syriac liturgy would not be abolished but rather modified, and the East Syriac language would be preserved (Brown 1956: 109). Perhaps Menezes “readily agreed to this concession ... as it would not benefit a people who were ignorant alike of the Syriac and Latin tongues” as Augur would have us believe (Augur 1990 [1903]: 50). Augur’s observation is significant as it suggests Menezes had realized that the Thomas Christians neither actively used Syriac nor incorporated Latin into their practices, even after almost a century of Franciscan-Jesuit interventions.

Notably, the Synod did not mandate the use of Latin among the Thomas Catholics but, after stating the poor competency of both the clergy and the laity in Syriac, recommended steps be taken to ensure that “the creed, and the commandments of God, and the church, the articles of faith, and other Christian doctrines in the Malabar tongue [Malayalam], that so all may understand them, and not in the Syriac, which the people do not understand” (Geddes 1694: 360). The Synod also talked about the need for a catechism in Malayalam (Geddes 1694: 174) and emphasized that confessors should be proficient in this language (Geddes 1694: 281).¹⁵ While this proposal was logically sound, for the beleaguered Thomas Christians, abandoning Syriac – even in favour of their mother tongue – was tantamount to forsaking their exalted caste identity and heritage (as evidenced from the events discussed in the next section). Thus, we can be sure that by the time of the Synod of Diamper, Syriac had almost certainly become a key identity plank for the Thomas Catholics of Kerala, despite the fact that accounts claim that most clergy may not have held full competency in this holy tongue.¹⁶

Importantly, the Thomas Christians accorded significantly greater value to an exoglossic religious language than their mother tongue, a vernacular that was not

15 The publication by Geddes (1694) contains a translation of a 1606 document called “Synodo Diocesano” published in Coimbra, which contains detailed descriptions of the Synod and all the agreements reached during it. Since the original Portuguese document has no page numbers, we quote primarily the English translation.

16 Here, we depart from Eugène Tisserant, who asserted that, during the Synod, “[t]he priests spoke in Syrian, the lay deputies in Malayalam” (Tisserant 1957: 57). He refers to the same 1606 document (“Synodo Diocesano”). We, however, were not able to find any such statements there. There is a short list of theologians and priests (including Francis Roz) who are able to speak both East Syriac and the “language of Malabar”, under *Accam nona*, *Decreto vigesimo quinto* [9th Action, 25th decree] (Synodo Diocesano 1606) of this document, but the language used during the meetings is not mentioned. We therefore refrain from asserting the native clergy’s competency or incompetency in Syriac.

“functionally transparent” enough to mark ethnic exclusivity. This attachment to a foreign language of holy ritual was thus a tool for maintaining a distinction that could not be achieved by Malayalam which was used in quotidian life and by all religious communities of Kerala. It could also be the case that East Syriac became a marker of distinction because of the desire to preserve a traditional caste affiliation. It will be remembered that by 1599 the Jesuits had been actively proselytizing lower castes for decades. Thus, a closer association with the Portuguese threatened the loss of caste exclusivity, signalling a potential reduction in status and material benefits.

3.5 Aftermath of the Synod

Soon after the Synod, Francis Roz was appointed the archbishop of the Thomas Christians. An intriguing incident which illustrates the centrality that East Syriac had acquired in the lives of the Thomas Christians took place during the tenure of the next archbishop, Stephen Brito, a Jesuit. In 1627 or 1628, a Dominican named Francis Donati, endorsed by Propaganda Fide,¹⁷ reached Malabar with the intention of starting a school for training Thomas Christian clerics. He resonated exceedingly well with these Christians because he knew and taught Syriac. In contrast, Stephen Brito had no knowledge of it. This led the archdeacon George to envisage Donati as the coadjutor and successor to de Brito (Tisserant 1957: 75–76).

What ensued was a bitter conflict between the Thomas Christian clergy and Brito over language, doctrine and education. The tone and tenor of this conflict can be fathomed from two Malayalam-language memoranda of Thomas Christian clergy in 1632 and 1645. The originals are lost, but two early copies are kept at the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan (number MS Y 116 Sup), and a 1978 commented reprint – named “Milan records” (*Milan Rekhaikal*) – is available, edited by Scaria Zacharia.

The first memorandum (1632) made the following assertions: a) the Thomas Christians had historically adhered to the East Syriac rite, identifying themselves as Syrians in terms of liturgical tradition, b) their prelates had consistently been proficient in East Syriac, c) the current archbishop lacked proficiency in Syriac, a deficiency that crippled the community’s discipline and stature, d) the priests would not accept any prelate who was not adequately versed in East Syriac, and e) the quality of instruction provided at the Vaipicotta seminary did not meet the community’s expectations about priesthood (Zacharia 1978: 116–117).

¹⁷ The *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* (Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith) was established by Pope Gregory XV in 1622 as a central institution of the Catholic Church responsible for missionary work and the spread of Christianity in non-Christian lands. It was created to coordinate and oversee evangelization efforts, ensuring that missionary activities were directly controlled by Rome rather than colonial powers like Spain and Portugal. See Guilday (1921).

In 1645, the Thomas Catholics, led by their new Archdeacon Thomas and along with their clergy and prominent laity, presented a memorandum to the Portuguese Viceroy. This memorandum, while building upon the concerns expressed in 1632, was significantly longer and more vociferous. It made several pointed remarks regarding Syriac and the East Syriac rite: a) the Thomas Christians identified themselves as Syrian Christians, a heritage they believed necessitated that their prelates possess fluency in Syriac; its absence would result in the diocese losing its majesty, and the erosion of their devotional practices and conventions, b) the community emphasized the challenges posed by their reliance on handwritten Syriac texts, as the potential for errors in their usage would increase if the users were not well-versed in the language, c) they demanded that only prelates proficient in Syriac be appointed to oversee their ecclesiastical affairs (Zacharia 1978: 109).

The memorandum accused the Jesuits of deliberately providing substandard ecclesiastical training to the children of the Thomas Christian community (Zacharia 1978: 110), a grievance that was particularly directed at their approach to the Syriac language. While the memorandum acknowledged some early Jesuits who had thoroughly mastered Syriac, it lamented that subsequent priests had learned it only superficially, for the sake of appearances. As a result, these priests spoke and read Syriac in a manner that the Thomas Christians found unrecognizable, failing to meet the standards of fluency and authenticity. It rhetorically asked how children could achieve proficiency in Syriac when it was taught by individuals who themselves lacked mastery. This failure, the memorandum asserted, had harmed Syriac, leading to a perceptible decline in the number of priests capable of reading Syriac flawlessly (Zacharia 1978: 115).

Interestingly, the 1645 memorandum upends the Jesuits' accusations of the native clergy's and the Thomas Christians' alleged incompetency in Syriac. It shifts the focus of inadequacy onto the Jesuits themselves, portraying them as the ones who have failed to demonstrate linguistic and ecclesiastical competency. Lastly, this text mentions that the Thomas Catholics had sent yet another memorandum to the Pope through Donati, written in Syriac (Zacharia 1978: 115). This document, however, appears to be lost. Since Donati was present in Kerala between 1627 and 1629, this is most likely the period when the memorandum was sent.

The "Milan Records" do not give enough evidence to ascertain the levels of competency in Syriac of either the European missionaries or Thomas Christians at different periods. What is certain is that Syriac had become imbued with social meanings of ecclesiastical authority, ethnic difference and traditional caste status. This, in turn, might have prompted at least some prominent members, if not most, of the high Thomas clergy to master Syriac to a higher level in order to advance their claims to exclusivity vis-à-vis the European clergy and advance the cause of claiming a higher degree of autonomy in their ecclesiastical affairs.

The tensions that sprouted and escalated under Francis Roz and Stephen Brito culminated under archbishop Francis Garcia in 1653, when the majority of the Thomas Christians formally resolved to sever obedience to the Jesuits. In response, Rome intervened through Propaganda Fide, delegating Carmelite missionaries to address the schism. Their efforts, in collaboration with the native clergy, were largely successful, with more than two-thirds of the churches returning to the Catholic fold. But as the Thomas Catholics were reluctant to obey the Padroado bishops, Rome erected the Vicariate Apostolic of Malabar without suppressing the Padroado jurisdiction so that the Christians might not be left without a bishop; thus, these Catholics got divided into two jurisdictions, viz. the Padroado and the Propaganda (Pallipurathkunnel 1982: 3).

When the Dutch invaded Cochin in 1663, they suspected that all Catholic priests were agents of Rome, trying to infiltrate the Dutch East India Company, and “peremptorily ordered all European Roman Catholic Ecclesiastics to quit the coast” (Augur 1990 [1903]: 239). The Jesuits shifted their residence to Ambhazhakkadu and started a new seminary at Puthenchira (both in the present Trichur district), where they continued to teach Syriac until the Society of Jesus was suppressed in 1773. When John Riberio, a Jesuit, was appointed the bishop of Crangannore in 1703 his consecration was done in East Syriac, though it was a verbatim translation of the Latin Pontifical, and the new bishop himself was well-versed in East Syriac (Pallipurathkunnel 1982: 87, 93).

3.6 Carmelites and Syriac

The Carmelite period did not witness upheavals comparable in magnitude to those of 1653. It was, nevertheless, characterized by persistent efforts by the Thomas Catholics to affirm their Syriac identity and retain the East Syriac liturgical tradition. Central to these efforts was the aspiration to secure a bishop aligned with their rite and social standing. The dynamics driving these aspirations were multifaceted. One was the continued imposition of the Latin liturgy by the Carmelites. Another was the continuing integration of both Latin Catholics and Thomas Catholics within the new ecclesiastical framework, which proved incompatible with the caste-conscious Thomas Christians.

That the Carmelites were aware of the emotional currency of Syriac among Thomas Catholics is evident from an incident involving Friar Peter Paul of St. Francis. As the founder of a seminary (1682) at Varappuzha, he petitioned the Propaganda Fide that the seminary professors be permitted to celebrate Mass in Syriac, sought a directive ensuring that the seminary rector and bishop prioritize the study of Latin

and other sciences while maintaining the Syrian Rite for the conferment of sacred orders, and requested assurances be given that the Propaganda had no intention of altering the East Syriac rite (Pallipurathkunnel 1982: 45). The requests of Cornelius of St. Cyprian and the native bishop Alexander de Campo to the Propaganda to send liturgical books in Syriac and to send two priests to teach Syriac also indicate how Syriac was reverentially perceived during this period (Pallipurathkunnel 1982: 15–16).

Despite these prudent measures, the seminary at Varappuzha became a site of conflict. The Carmelites appointed Bartholomew Anna, a scholar of West Syriac as an instructor. This decision was strongly resisted by the Thomas Christians, who objected to the idea of a West Syriac scholar training their future clergy (Joseph 2015: 372). They insisted on East Syriac tradition, demonstrating their unwavering and exclusive identification with it, which, by this time, may just as well have become their *raison d'être*.

One could also ask whether it was the language or rather the West Syriac liturgy that was resisted by the Thomas Christians. Indeed, there are differences between the East Syriac and West Syriac liturgical traditions, stemming from Christological divergences. But it seems what upset the Thomas Christians was the change in language, rather than differences in theology. That Gregorios Abdal Jaleel of Jerusalem – who arrived in Kerala in 1665 to regularize the unusual ordination of a non-Catholic bishop¹⁸ – immediately demanded a change in liturgical language to West Syriac (thus causing a split in church, cf. Visvanathan 1995: 42), rather than seeking to indoctrinate the Thomas Christians with the Monophysite theology he himself subscribed to, indicates the centrality of language in their religious life.

4 Conclusions

The historical accounts of conflicts related to the East Syriac language and rite among the Thomas Catholics of Kerala reveal that the status of this exoglossic religious language changed fundamentally over the 16th and 17th centuries. The available accounts give us reason to believe that it did not function as a marker of distinctiveness prior to the Portuguese advent. In the pre-colonial Malabar society, this role was played by the stature of the Thomas Christians within the caste hierarchy, and perhaps also their subordination to Nestorian bishops. It was the European efforts at Latinization and doctrinal reform, coupled with anxieties about caste loss, that

¹⁸ His arrival marked the beginning of a tumultuous phase in the history of non-Catholic Christianity in Kerala, a topic beyond the scope of this article. See Brown (1956).

initially made Syriac a tool of resistance to imposed changes and later transformed it into a marker of distinction and identity.

Already in the first part of the 16th century, the refusal of the Thomas Christians to ordain priests not versed in East Syriac showed that it could function as an important marker of distinction. By the end of the century, as demonstrated by the Synod of Diamper, Syriac had become the only non-negotiable ecclesiastical component for the Thomas Christians. Thus, although an exoglossic, foreign and high language, it came to be seen as more important for the identity of Thomas Christians than their mother tongue, which was, for most of the clergy and laity, some variety of Malayalam.

Of course, our claim is made with certain reservations. The explicit identification of East Syriac with an emerging ethnicity most probably did not extend to all Thomas Christians, but primarily to those who could assert caste purity and superiority. Neophytes from lower castes often favored Latinization, which offered emancipation and social mobility. Even some members of the old clergy appear to have accepted Latin liturgical practices. Nevertheless, the available evidence suggests that the great majority of the descendants of early Thomas Christians found themselves in a position where their only viable means of asserting ethnic exclusivity vis-à-vis other Christian groups was through attachment to their sacred language. As European missionaries began to formally spurn caste distinctions, linguistic distinction emerged as a primary strategy for preserving social and cultural status.

The mutual accusations exchanged between the Jesuits and the Thomas Christians regarding the clergy's lack of proficiency in Syriac do not conclusively establish the actual level of competency in this sacred language. It is possible that throughout the period mentioned, the competency in Syriac increased on both sides. At least among the leading segment of the Thomas Christian clergy, command of Syriac increased – from a passive ability to read to an active competency in both writing and speaking. This is evidenced by the growing number of institutions offering Syriac, the increased number of Vatican-sanctioned translations into Syriac, and increased correspondence in this language.

This shows that even an exoglossic language can be domesticated and turned into an ethnic marker, not necessarily less powerful than a more endoglossic standard. While it is true that endoglossic standards require less training to master than exoglossic ones, and that basic literacy skills in such standards can significantly expand the communicative functions of the language, this appears to be irrelevant in the period prior to the advent of “print capitalism” (Anderson 2006). When writing material is costly and print materials scarce, learning to read and write will be confined to specialized parts of society, most often the clergy or some officials at monarchic courts. For this relatively small part of society that monopolizes literacy

skills, learning a new language in written or spoken form for specialized purposes can become a powerful tool for cultivating ethnic differences across the populations they govern. In this sense, East Syriac, although mostly confined to religious rites, could have functioned as the principal ethnic marker, differentiating the Thomas Christians both from other Christians and other religious communities in Malabar.

We are, however, not claiming that language was the principal source of the aforementioned conflicts. In this paper, due to restrictions of space, we have overlooked other issues (economic, regional, racial) which many scholars see as the source of issues over language and liturgy. It would be interesting to further explore how missionary work and language-related conflicts impacted trade in this period.

Regarding religious language and ethnicity, it would also be relevant to explore the role of Syriac in the 18th and 19th centuries, which saw the rise of print, including the Protestant missionaries' translations of the Bible, in many parts of Malabar. The 19th century, apart from British domination, also witnessed a rise in schooling in English, Sanskrit, Tamil and Malayalam, tempting the researcher to suggest that these developments weakened East Syriac as an identity marker.

This, however, might not be the case. Though Catholics embraced English as a means of upward social mobility, cultural capital acquisition and greater integration into the colonial bureaucratic apparatus, Syriac never entirely lost its evocative power. On the contrary, since the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), many individuals and organizations have been actively engaged in reviving and revitalizing Syriac. The books and pamphlets produced by these groups often hinge on dichotomies – such as Syriac versus Latin, and Eastern Church versus Western Church – and frequently evince an essentialist orientation. Within these texts, Portuguese missionaries are frequently depicted as zealots, dismissive of indigenous traditions and insensitive to cultural nuances. Koonammakkal (2007), Podipara (1970) and Thomas (1924) typify this historiographical position.

It is no coincidence that the C.M.I. – the congregation to which Mar Yohend, mentioned at the beginning of this paper, belonged – has been at the forefront of such narratives. Most writers mentioned above belong to this congregation and their works glorify the pre-Portuguese days as an age in which Christians are portrayed as having been seamlessly integrated within the old social order. In fact, there is a 1964 tract titled *Hendo: The Church of India*, again evoking Mar Yohend (the etymology of which is mentioned in the Introduction to this paper) and his positions. At the diocesan level too, there are various platforms engaged in similar efforts to reclaim and assert Syriac heritage (Antony 2016; CMSIndia 2014; Nasrani Youth 2019). These attempts are fecund fodder for another research.

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