

Knanaya Christian Folk Songs and the Merchant Leader *Knai Thomma*: Some Reflections on Christian *Margam* and Knanaya Folklore in the Twentieth Century

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Abstract

The current paper intends to foreground and study the folk imagination surrounding the pre-modern figure of *Knai Thomma* who is believed to have led a group of migrant Syrian Christians from the Mesopotamian region to Malabar (roughly corresponds to the territory of the contemporary state of Kerala) in the fourth century AD through a study of two Knanaya Christian folk songs. Through this paper, the folkloric hero *Knai Thomma*, who continues to be a significant presence in the traditions of the Knanaya Christian Church which was officially recognized in the early twentieth century, is read against the broader backdrop of thriving trans-regional oceanic trade networks that converged on the ancient port of Muziris in Malabar and the unique configuration of early Christian *margam* that developed therein.

Keywords: Syrian Christians, Southist Christians, Knanaya Christians, Folklore, Legends

In the present day, the St. Thomas Syrian Christian community of Kerala is constituted by multiple Christian denominations all of which unitedly trace back their ancestry to the apostolic mission of St. Thomas in Malabar in the first century AD. Amongst them, there exists a sub-community of Christians who identify themselves as ethnically distinct from the larger collective of St. Thomas Christians (also referred to as Northists) known as the Knanaya Christians; Knanaya Christians, although affiliated to the St. Thomas tradition, trace back their ancestry to the legendary fourth-century migration of a group of Syrian Christians under the leadership of the merchant, *Knai Thomma* (also referred to by earlier scholarship as Thomas of Cana) from Mesopotamian region to Malabar (present-day Kerala). Existing historical, anthropological, and sociological scholarship on early Christianity in India has noted of this distinct collective memory and tradition of the Knanaya Christians (Brown 71, Ayyar 9-10,

Visvanathan 13). The Knanaya Christians, who are also known as *Tekkumbhagar* or Southist Syrian Christians, emphasize their ethnic distinction from other communities through the social practice of endogamy and their unique folk culture and traditions. It may be noted here, that although culturally united, the Knanaya Christians are bifurcated into two churches today: the Knanaya Catholic Church and the Knanaya Jacobite Church; the former is a Metropolitan Archeparchy under the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church in India which is under the Roman Catholic See and came to official existence in 1911, and the latter is an independent archdiocese under the Syrian Orthodox Church which received official recognition in 1910, respectively. Although existing scholarship on Christianity in India has extensively worked on the history and culture of St. Thomas Syrian Christians in Kerala, little attention has been paid to that of the ethnically distinct community of Knanaya Christians; this may be primarily owing to the community's small population strength of only over three lakhs globally in the present day. Given the same, this paper attempts to address this research lacuna as possible within its limited scope.

The folklore of the Knanaya Christians is a relatively vast oeuvre of over eighty folk songs, multiple traditions, and a few legends surrounding Knai Thomma that exist along with allied folk material culture. These folk forms are performed and practiced by the community at specific lifecycle events primarily wedding celebrations. Although the wedding ceremony is itself conducted in the Church under the aegis of the priestly order following church-specific liturgical rites, the celebrations that follow the church ceremony include the singing of Knanaya Christian folk songs along with associated folk traditions, and round dances which are performed by the laity in a custom-ordained manner. It may be noted here that much of these folk songs and traditions have been textualized and made available in printed formats since the early twentieth century through works including the various editions of Knanaya Christian folk song books titled *Purathanapattukal* compiled by P. U. Lukas since 1910, and other church literature. Correlatedly, a few scholarly works in the twentieth century such as Richard Swiderski's *Blood Weddings: The Knanaya Christians of Kerala* (1988), P. J. Thomas' *Christian Literature of Kerala* (1935), Choornar Choondal's *Christian Folklore* (1988) amongst others, and the recent work by T.O. Aleyas titled *Syrian Manual* have all studied said Knanaya Christian folklore to a significant extent. Amongst its many other functions, the celebrated folklore of Knanaya Christians primarily reanimates what may be considered a foundational memory of the community's ancestral migration to and subsequent settlement in the land of Malabar under the leadership of the Syriac-speaking merchant Knai Thomma and bishop Joseph of Uraha in the fourth century. The current paper is situated in the understanding that Knai Thomma who is a central figure in the said memory of migration, in many ways, epitomizes the community values, norms, and cultural ideology that have configured the Knanaya folk identity through centuries till the twentieth century during which time the Knanaya Christian collectives received official recognition from their mother

churches, and beyond. In fact, it is of relevance to note here that the etymology roots of the community's present-day nomenclature "Knanaya" is derived from the name of pre-modern merchant leader Knai Thomma and comes to mean 'the followers of Knai Thomma' or 'the people of Knai Thomma' in Malayalam. The current paper however argues that apart from the obvious significance of the folk hero in the community's folk imagination, the figure of Knai Thomma also epitomizes the nature of the early Christian margam which evolved in Malabar in the context of the wider history of pre-modern maritime mercantilism. The scope of this paper is however limited to a textual study of sections from two Knanaya Christian folk songs from amongst the several other songs and genres of the community's folklore. Further, it may be noted here that the latter part of the paper is organized as a set of reflections on the location of this folkloric memory in the twentieth-century Kerala modernity during which the Knanaya Christian churches received recognition and autonomy within their ecclesiastical organizations and in the larger public sphere.

The first folk song which is being studied here is the song "Munnam Malankara" ("Before the Malabar Migration") which falls under the ethnic genre of *pen pattukal* ("female songs") in the Southist folk song oeuvre.¹ "Munnam Malankara" is a celebrated folk song of the Knanaya Christians which is conventionally sung during wedding celebrations. The song narratives, and through it re-memembers, the collective memory of the Southist ancestral migration from the Mesopotamian region into Malabar in the early years of the Christian era with the figure of *Knai Thomma* at its center. It is to be noted here that the Malayalam song texts of both the folk songs referred to in this paper have been freely transliterated into the Latin script by the author and the English translation of the songs has been reproduced from their existing translation carried out by Jacob Vellian.

The song text of "Munnam Malankara" which is of twenty two lines is as follows:

*Munnam Malankara kudiyearum athinalea,
Thomman kinanennndheagam mutrunanavarea-meayyea
Rajammakkalennonpathum kudi pokinthu
Kudiyaruttamarakumivar naalunuurum
Kassolikkayarulalea kappal pookinthea-meayyea
Vannu paradeshi kodungaloor pokinthu.
Pokinthar, cherakone kandu parishadhikamayi,
Ponnum pavizham muthum kondu rajyam kondare
Vannu pozhunnu theernu muthirnu karyam kandare-meayyea
Chooli parl perumakal thelinjiruppan
Koduthaar padhavikal panchamelam pathinettum
Kombum kazhalaalavattam shakhum vidhanam-meayyea
Ponmudiyum mattunalla chamayamellam
Koduthaar padhavikal paavada pakalvilakkum*

Rajavaadhiyangalezhum kurava moonum-meayyea
Kottum kuravayum nallalankaaramellam
Ishtathode koduthittangarachanum
Ennivayellam vaangikondan thomman kinanum-meayyea
Cherchayal kurichedutha chepedum vaangi
Aracharkarachan koduthoru padhavikal
Aadithyam chadhranumangulla naalokke-meayyea
Aadithyam chadhranumangulla naalokke. (Vellian, Purathana 6)

‘When of yore to immigrate to Malabar
The gentleman Thomman Kinan essayed, –Verily.
The king’s sons belonging to seventy two families,
These good citizens, four hundred,
Embarked by the grace of Catholicos- Verily,
The foreigner who came entered Cranganore,
He entered, and when he visited the Chera King, in plenty
He presented gold and coral and pearls and obtained the country.
He came, at an auspicious time endeavoured, and gained his end, – Verily.
That his greatness maybe manifest in all the world around,
He gave him marks of honour—the fivefold band, the eighteen castes,
The horn, the flute, the peacock feather fan, the conch, the canopy, –Verily.
The gold crowns and all other good ornaments.
He gave him marks of honour: the walking-cloth the day-time lamp,
The seven kinds of royal musical instruments, and three lingua cheers,–Verily.
Drums and lingual cheers and all good pomp
The king with pleasure gave,
And all these did Tomman Kinan accept, –Verily.
He got also the copper plate deed fittingly engraved.
The marks of honour which the Kings King gave
Last for all the days of the existence of the sun and the moon, –Verily.
For all the days of the existence of the sun and the moon.’
(Vellian, *Ancient* 46-47)

The song narrates the migratory journey of four hundred Southists, belonging to seventy-two families, under the leadership of *Knai Thomma* who is referred to as *Thomman Kinan* to Malabar. It may be noted here that in the folklore of the Knanaya Christians, *Knai Thomma* is variedly described as *Thomman Kinan*, *Thommachan* and the like; these epithets while being characteristic of oral genres in general, in this case, also records the folk’s affective indulgence of and reverence towards the folk merchant leader (Ong 38). *Knai Thomma*, along with the immigrant Syrian Christians (also referred to in the song as *rajamakkal* or ‘sons of royalty’), arrive at the port city of *Kodungaloor* or Cranganore by sea and proceed to meet with the Chera ruler of Malabar. The listener is informed that *Knai Thomma*, who is also referred to in the song as a

paradeshi (“foreigner”) presents the Chera king with coveted gifts of gold, coral, and pearls in plenty, and in return obtains the right to settle in down in the land, a crown and a country to rule, and various royal privileges — some of which are elaborated in the song. The song further informs the reader that the various rights and privileges received by *Knai Thomma* are engraved on a set of copper plate deeds following the juridical register of pre-modern trade grants which, however, simultaneously implies to the listeners the timelessness of the contract between the local ruler and the foreigner as one that will “Last for all the days of the existence of the sun and the moon.” *Knai Thomma*’s positioning here in the song as *paradeshi* who nonetheless earned his rights in the new land is a premise upon which the distinct ethnic and yet indigenously integrated identity of the Knanaya Christians rests on.

Further, it becomes apparent in the song that *Knai Thomma*, the leader of the immigrant Christians is a worthy model of a noble merchant who is well familiar with the ways of the world, specifically that of Malabar. Through the ceremonious act of gift-giving, the Chera ruler and the merchant leader enter into an alliance which certainly has juridic-economic significance on the one hand, in the community’s folk imagination, its significance far supersedes it. As Marcel Maus in his study of archaic cultures, gifting was a complex phenomenon that simultaneously carried a material and moral function, a symbolic and collective function, and was associated with notions of honor and pride (42). Although the various gifts presented to the Chera king may seem all too common and familiar to us as twenty-first-century readers, these objects were in fact rare and coveted commodities of exchange in the pre-modern history of maritime mercantilism; in offering the Chera king these objects, which are symbols of transregional wealth and prosperity at the time, what is also offered is *Knai Thomma*’s binding allegiance to the Chera king which in turn takes the form of a political contract that marks the beginning of the former’s everlasting rule under the Chera king as a satellite ruler in Malabar.

The figure of *Knai Thomma*, the noble folk hero of the Knanaya Christians can be further located in the history of pre-modern maritime trade. A. Sreedhara Menon observation on the convergence of thriving transregional maritime mercantile movements in Malabar in his now seminal history of Kerala is of significance here. He writes:

Kerala had contacts with the countries of the outside world even from time immemorial. The Arabs, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Phoenicians, the Israelites, the Greeks, the Romans and the Chinese were among the foreign people who had contacts with the Kerala coast in the ancient period... Ancient Kerala had been famous for her spices and it was her fame as the land of spices that brought foreign people and cultures to her shores even from the 3rd millennium B.C., if not earlier. (57)

In this context, the port city of *Kodungaloor* or Cranganore where *Knai Thomma* and the migrant Christians arrive, as mentioned in the song, is not inconsequential; in fact, Cranganore which has been associated with the thriving ancient port of Muziris where traders and commodities from across the world circulated along with people, culture, languages and other objects is the spatial and discursive backdrop against which the arrival of *Knai Thomma* and the Syrian Christians is to be located. Thus, amongst the conventional folk types of legendary heroes in India which include martial, religious and mythical heroes, we see the unique location of the Knanaya Christian merchant hero of *Knai Thomma* (Bhattacharjee 3). One may also argue that this legendary hero as if emerges in the folk imagination is a local personification of the wider geographies of the transoceanic movement, mercantilism, and cultural translation and movement which characterized pre-modern times.

Thus, the nature of the several royal privileges that were granted to *Knai Thomma* by Cheraman Perumal as narrated in the folk song “Munnam Malankara” becomes significant to understand. As per the Knanaya tradition, a total of seventy-two royal privileges were granted to the immigrant Christians which, as narrated by the song, include the following: the fivefold band, rights over eighteen castes, the horn, the flute, the peacock feather fan, the conch, the canopy, the walking-cloth the day-time lamp, seven kinds of royal musical instruments, and three lingua cheers. When a closer inspection of the nature of these privileges is undertaken, it becomes apparent that these were primarily enjoyed by the Hindu upper caste communities of the then Malabar; this is particularly indicated by gifting of the *mudi* (“crown”) and the right to command over eighteen castes that are granted to *Knai Thomma* wherewith the community socially and politically integrates into the caste stratified society of the then Malabar. Several anthropological and sociological works conducted on Syrian Christians, including the works of Susan Visvanathan, Anantakrishna Ayyar, Placid Podipara, Saumya Varghese and the like, have studied the distinct nature of integration and social organization of early Syrian Christian community within an otherwise pre-dominantly Hindu community which is understood as Christian *margam*. As Saumya Varghese comments:

Christianity in medieval Kerala was seen as a *margam* or a "way to life" just like Buddhism, Jainism and Judaism. The 'Nazrani Margakkar' followed the tenets of Christianity as preached by the Persian prelates. Yet, religion did not dictate their everyday engagements. The nazrani adherence to the caste privileges and obligations, specified by custom and law, shaped their interaction with the other social classes of Malabar. Thus, despite their encounters with Latin and Syrian prelates representing and educating them on 'western' Christian customary practices, the space occupied by the nazranis was more along jati consciousness. (31)

Based on the above, it may be argued that the ethos of cultural translation which underlines the heterogenous phenomenon of the Christian *margam* is represented

in the folk hero *Knai Thomma*, and by extension, his descendants. In order to further understand the modes of Christian *margam* ingrained in the folk imagination of *Knai Thomma*, one may momentarily refer to another Knanaya Christian folk song titled “Nallorurisalem” (“The Good City of Jerusalem”) – a section of which is as follows:

Nallorurisalem thannil nagariyil
Marathakamuthu vilayunna naatillu
Mayilaadumpole vilangunna manannu
Paththaramaatinu nirameni cholaamme
Cheenakuzhalpole chinthunna mannanu
Margathilerivottum kuravilli mannanu
Malanadu vazhuvaan pokenam mannanu
Bavayude kalpanayaale purapettu
Yathraaviduchudanunuvaadhavum vaangi

Athukondu kulagalilamooshangal koduthu
Palakoottam kasolikka padhavikal koduthu
Rajavaadhyathodukoodi yogyathayaal nadathi
Shuddhamaana thrikkaiyile pusthakavum vaangi... (Vellian, Purathana 5)

‘In the good city of Jerusalem,
In the land where emeralds and pearls grow,
Of the lord, resplendent as a dancing peacock,
The complexion, I may say, resembles gold of ten and a half carats.
He speaks like Chinese flute;
He is not lacking in religious zeal,
That noble lord wants reign Malabar.
He started by Bava’s command;
He obtained his permission and forthwith set out on his journey.
He was given high social rank,
He was given the several privileges of a Catholicos,
And he was fittingly sent off with regal musical instruments.
From his holy hand, he received the Book (Vellian, *Ancient* 51-53)

The above-referred section of the song narrates events preceding *Knai Thomma*’s migration to Malabar which occur in Jerusalem. While the entire song text is beyond the scope of the current paper, what interests us are two aspects: the folk’s description of the persona of *Knai Thomma* and secondly, yet correlatedly, the intent and purpose of the migration of *Knai Thomma* and fellow Christians to Malabar. For one, the folk song represents the physiognomy of *Knai Thomma* in figurative hyperbole by drawing comparisons to precious commodities of pre-modern transoceanic circulation such as dancing peacock, gold and Chinese flute, and the like, much like the folk song “Munnam Malankara”. The song also concomitantly emphasizes *Knai Thomma*’s nobility through these descriptions as

it narrates the benediction of high social ranks on him by the Catholicos. Maurice Halbwach's observation in his now seminal study titled *Collective Memory* becomes important in this context; Halbwach notes that in the dominant representations of nobility, "it seems as if wealth and rank went to those who merited them because of their gifts and personal qualities" so much so that assemblages of institutions, land, and the lineage associated with such personas acquired social legitimacy and acceptance (122). Although Halbwach's pertains to his study of feudal nobility in late nineteenth-century Europe, one may extend his observation to the current context. Further, it is also the case that, despite his aforementioned status as a merchant, *Knai Thomma's* mission to Malabar is not recounted by the song as of a mercenary nature; instead, his journey is remembered as a Christian mission which is meant for the edification of the church of St. Thomas in Malabar. As the song narrates, *Knai Thomma* who is a zealous Christian is sent to Malabar by the command of the Bava, presumably referring to the Holy Patriarch of Antioch, and he receives the many blessings of the Holy Catholicos, presumably of Seleucia-Ctesiphon in Persia. Although there exists amongst church scholarship many a contention on the historical place names and ecclesiastical authorities mentioned in the song, the current paper intentionally elides these contentions as the purpose here is not to historicize these songs but to understand the larger contours around which *Knai Thomma* and his migration is remembered by the Knanaya Christians. In summation, in the folk imagination of the Christian merchant as evidenced in the songs "Munnam Malankara" and "Nallorurisalem", as also across other folk songs and associated legends, *Knai Thomma* is a seamless blend of material prosperity, social standing, and personal merits and at the same time, very importantly, a devout Christian; while he represents both the skills and worldly knowledge of a merchant, he also represents the spiritual goodness of an early missionary providing therein aspirational models for the community. These perceptions of the community's folk leader, in many senses, can be seen as molding the moral and socio-cultural attitudes of the individual and the community at large in the present as well as influence their social and political interactions (Tangherlini 8). Therefore, the role and function of Knanaya Christian folklore as simultaneously cultural expressions of collective pride and at the same time a social model for the folk community is important to understand, and requires further study.

A Few Reflections on the Significance of *Knai Thomma* in the Twentieth Century

While the previous section of this paper attempted a textual study of folkloric imagination surrounding the figure of *Knai Thomma* to suggest in this image a crystallization of the configurations of pre-modern Christian *margam* and maritime mercantilism, the following section hopes to situate the folk imagination in conversation with the underlying rhetoric of colonial modernity of the twentieth century which the Knanaya Christians adopt.

Modernity as a phenomenon has largely been seen as a euro-centric project which affected significant socio-economic and intellectual restructurings, and developed

in tandem with the political formation of the nation-state. The language which attended to this phenomenon, and was adopted with its claims of universalist representation, was that of western historicism which according to Dipesh Chakrabarty conceived of modernity “as something that became global over time, by originating in one place and then spreading outside it” (7). Inherent to these conceptions was, amongst other things, the restructuring of alternate conceptions of time and space into the model of linear and progressive development, adjacent to that of the nation-state. This was reflected in the epistemic practices of the West primarily from the eighteenth century onwards which operatively produced dichotomies such as that of the ‘modern’ and ‘anti-modern’; ‘historic’ and ‘pre-historic’ or ‘ahistoric’; ‘public’ and ‘private’; ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ etc. In other words, if one were to extend Edward Said’s seminal argument in *Orientalism*, in European thought, the West and East were not just geographical oppositions but also moral and cultural oppositions. In such a conception, folklore which was considered as the domain of the rural, oral, and of the *volks* was defined in oppositional terms to the emerging urban literary culture, and relegated therein to the domain of the ahistoric (Noyes 20). In fact, much like other disciplines which trace their ancestry to the West, early folklore studies also inherited and systematically reproduced these dichotomies. Till the latter half of the twentieth century, folkloristics defined folklore in devolutionary terms as remnants of an archaic past in a state of the constant threat of devolvement, reducing concomitantly the role of folklorists to that of antiquarians (Dundes 6). In such understandings, one precluded the role and function of folklore as life-affirming and ethically edifying enclaves in the lived spheres of specific human societies that continued to thrive despite the large-scale modern transformations in the urban sphere.

Certainly, in the latter half of the twentieth century, critical scholarship challenged and punctured the foundational models of such epistemic constructions through fundamental revisions of the same and greater disciplinary reflections. In the field of Indian folkloristics, this was particularly visible in the puncturing of colonial folkloric practices through the critical framework of ‘colonial folklorists’ as used by Sadhana Naithani in her work *The Story-Time of the British Empire: Colonial and Postcolonial Folkloristics* (2010). Alongside such interventions, there was also a larger turn in critical scholarship through the analytic framework of ‘colonial modernity’. As Sanal Mohan notes, “The very language of colonial modernity articulates the fact that non-European societies had experienced a comparable cultural and social transformation that European societies had undergone, although they may differ substantially” (18). In these articulations, it becomes apparent that one of the ways in which the differential nature of the rhetoric of modernity worked in colonial countries was by the epistemic invisibilization of the alternate historical languages of collective memory which was inscribed in expressive culture of the masses and passed down from generations to generations; these expressions provided access to non-secular and affective domains of knowledge, unlike the reason-oriented rhetoric

of western historicism. As elucidated by Dilip Menon in his essay titled “Religion and Colonial Modernity: Rethinking Belief and Identity”, colonial structures of governance often ignored the alternative realms of locality and kinship which often articulated in religious terms - which, emerged, opposed and even were antagonistic to the idea of national identities (1663). Through his argument, Menon challenges the secularist and universalist premise of western modernity as also the language of historicism to foreground religious imagination as a way of engaging with modernity. In summation, the intervention posed by colonial modernity prised open two contradictory logics at work in the experience of modernity in the colonial space: one is the language of political modernity which followed historicist paradigms of reason and linear development in time, and the other is the alternate realm of the “irrational”, collective belief, or in other words the ‘anti-modern’. As A. K. Ramanujan elucidates through the figure of his father who simultaneously believed in astronomy and astrology in his essay “Is there an Indian Way of Thinking?”, the Indian condition is characterized by the coexistence of both the above-mentioned paradigms. Given the same, one ought to reflect on the import that these two co-existing paradigms have on the experience of modernity in traditional communities such as that of the Knanaya Christians in the twentieth century.

As mentioned earlier in the paper, the twentieth-century consolidations of Knanya Christian Church as relatively autonomous entities under the universal Catholic and Orthodox Churches was in many sense an outcome of the experience of modernity in Kerala. The rise of the sense of the modern in Kerala was characterized by emergent notions of the public as created through infrastructural developments, the spread of western education, development of print modernity and the like. During this time, many of the otherwise traditionally organized indigenous communities sought to define themselves by securing institutional recognition within the emerging public sphere through the consolidation and assertion of their socio-cultural and political capital. The collation and publication of the Knanaya folk song anthology, *Purathanapattukal* in 1910 by the Knanaya Catholic Church went hand in hand with their political and social desire for ecclesiastical recognition as Knanaya Catholic Church within the wider Roman Catholic Church (Aleyas 19). Ironically, the terms by which community sought to create for itself a distinct relationship with global Christendom and the emerging Kerala public sphere in the language and logic of modernity included its affirmation through the distinction encoded primarily in its folkloric memory. Therefore, it is argued here that the folk figure of *Knai Thomma* as it lives amongst the Knanaya Christians espouses the contradiction of colonial modernity in the twentieth century. On the one hand, *Knai Thomma* represents the pre-modern phenomenon of Christian *margam*, which presents a heterogenous and plural vision of the world, along with a memory of past opulence, grandeur, and power in a highly caste-stratified Malabar; on the other hand, the public habitat of this folk hero rests on the modern language of progress, social equality and codified Christianity. In accessing this folk memory

of *Knai Thomma* through the Knanaya Christian folk songs what is sustained are the phenomena of hetero-temporality and what Jann Assmann calls “cultural simultaneity”. The two facets of historical time that Timothy Tangherlini identifies in his comments on the genre of a legend may be extended here; he writes, “As such, there are two dimensions to the historical context of legend (folklore). On the one hand, there is the historical context of the purported events (internal historical context). On the other hand, there is the historical context of the performance (external historical context)” (9). In bringing these together in the realm of cultural memory, the past is brought into the present and in the process re-members cultural geographies from the bygone era which is repeated in endless continuity through inter-generational performance. This mode of hetero-temporality and cultural simultaneity brought in through the memory of *Knai Thomma* characterize the Knanaya Christian identity today.

Further, one may also argue that the memory of *Knai Thomma* which provides aspirational and ethical models for the folk community in the present, also provides a mode of accessing alternate epistemologies of cultural heterogeneity and religious plurality, potentially countering the reason-oriented narratives of early modernity or the communalist politics of the present. The resplendent figure of the pre-modern Knanaya Christian merchant leader, *Knai Thomma* who lived and prospered in Malabar thus represents tensions and ethical ways of thinking about one’s own epistemic locations.

Notes

¹The Knanaya folk songs are ethnically classified into *pen pattukal* (“female songs”), *aan pattukal* (“male songs”) and *palli pattukal* (“church songs”). These generic classifications can be understood as largely based on the content, occasion and gender of the singers. For a detailed understanding of these classifications, one may refer to the first edition *Purathanapattukal* edited by P. U. Lukas in 1910.

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