

Northists and Southists: A Folklore of Kerala Christians

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THE DIVISION

The Indian state of Kerala is unique in its religious diversity: approximately half the population is Hindu, one quarter Muslim and one quarter Christian. And these sectors are further divided internally. The caste divisions of the Hindus are, perhaps excessively, well-known. Both the Muslims and the Christians also have their internal divisions, into separate denominations and into caste-like groupings. Members of each of these divisions identify themselves and assert their superiority in legends which downgrade the other. The Christians have distinguished themselves into two mutually exclusive sections, the Northists and the Southists. While Kerala Christians today seldom acknowledge this division, it has been the theme of bitter polemic in the past and remains a basis for the invention of tradition in the present.

The Malayalam names for the Christian divisions are always Tekkumbhagar-Vadakumbhagar, but the English equivalents may be Nordhist-Suddhist or Northerner-Southerner, though Northist-Southist is most common. I first learned of them in discussions with Knanaya, members of a Kerala Christian ethnic group, who say they were once called Southists and occasionally repeat older legends to explain the name. Though there are no living oral traditions to this effect, written sources record that early Brahmin settlements in Kerala grouped themselves into "northern" and "southern" divisions around two rival centers (Veluthat n.d.). The Nayars, an important Hindu caste in Kerala, also recognized a north/south dividing line (Fuller 1976). Another important dual classification, the right/left caste division which some Tamil communities (Beck 1972; Appadurai 1974) employ, I have

not found in Kerala usage. It is quite possible that the Christians copied the north/south division from the prestigious Brahmin community as they copied so many other Brahmin traits.

My approach to the folklore of this division consists in examining specific expressions of the division. One interested person typically expresses the division before a stipulated audience in order to distinguish him/herself from members of the other group. I mingle the contemporary expressions of the opposition with older texts taking the same position, and include texts which provide a variant where none was collected. The effect of the whole is to display the entire field of northist/southist expression. It is not a folklore of solid texts but of positions, of common sentiments which may occasion outright texts.

DIVISION BY LOCATION

A succinct legend expressing the northist/southist division was set down by Mr. V. J. Jacob in the Foreword to the volume produced for the consecration of St. Mary's Jacobite Syrian Church, Calicut (1982):

During the 4th Century, there was a massive immigration of Syrian Christians to Kerala coast. They consisted of 400 Christians from 72 families belonging to seven tribes in Jerusalem, Syria, Bhagdad [*sic*] etc., under the leadership of the Merchant Chieftain Thomas of Cana Knayi Thoma accompanied by Bishop Mar Joseph of Edessa also known as Uraha a City of learning in Mesopotamia [*sic*] and a number of Priests and Deacons. For this immigration they had the blessing of the then Patriarch of Antioch and his deputy the Catholicos of the East in Mesopotamia [*sic*]. On landing in Cranganore in 345 A.D. they were greeted by the King Cherman Perumal and the native Christians there. The Perumal honored them by confirming many titles and privileges and allowed them to settle as a separate Community in a tax free land gifted to them on the Southern side of the Mahadevapuram Township nearby; the northern part already occupied by the native St. Thomas Christians. Thus the Division as Southerners and Northerners among Syrian Christians in Kerala. These immigrant Syrian Christians known as Knanayits maintain a separate Caste type Community even to-day, confirming their marriages within their race only.

The narrative describes the transfer of Syrian Christianity to Malabar while asserting Patriarch's (which Patriarch is another matter) con-

trol over the Christians in that area. The mission of 400 under the leadership of Thomas of Cana are vessels of that transfer and agents of the Patriarch's authority. They settle in Cranganore under a mandate to preserve their cultural and racial identity in contradistinction to the "native St. Thomas Christians" (cf. Brown 1982, 70-71). In Mr. Jacob's version of the legend the immigrants' distinctiveness is ratified by the location of their settlement: they establish themselves on the south side of the city apart from the native Christians on the north side, becoming Southists as opposed to the Northists (cf. Tisserant 1957, 8). Mr. Jacob, himself a Knanaya, in this narrative derives his own group directly from Southists emphatically set apart from Northists. Mr. Jacob's text celebrates the Patriarch of Antioch initiating a new church which perpetuates the tradition begun when his fourth century predecessor sent the mission to Malabar. The narrative makes it clear that the consecration is not simply the perpetuation of a cultural and racial inheritance. It is also another assertion of the social division required to maintain the community's uniqueness. Though known as Knanaya, they are still the Southists distinct from the Northists and entitled to their own church. This division narrative has a Southist voice and purpose in emphasizing the original separation of Southists from Northists in manners, race and settlement. Both narrator and audience experience an absolute division. The occasion of the consecration was well suited to a recitation and printed dissemination of this legend. Stating the Southists' aloofness from the rest of Kerala Christians consecrated the church socially as the Patriarch consecrated it spiritually.

Mr. Jacob simply positions the two groups on opposite sides of the town. In Kerala towns different groups live apart from each other; opposed groups live opposite each other (on either side of a dividing line). It is therefore not too surprising to find that other informants placed the divided settlements on two separate streets in Cranganore (cf. Thurston 1975 [1909], v. VI: 404) or on the north and south sides of the king's palace (cf. Hatch 1939, 86). Learning that I had visited Cranganore a Knanaya lawyer in Kottayam remarked:

When the families came from Syria they settled on the south bank of the Periyar. The others were on the north bank. The river runs very quickly there—very wide and hard to cross.

He did not mention the Northists and Southists, just the difference in settlement. He had heard of the names, but assumed they referred to the relative location of the two communities. He wanted to make my

recent experience of the Periyar River vivid in terms of Knanaya history.

In these legends the Southists always are a separate community from the start. The narrative affirms their separateness in terms as absolute as the cardinal directions, the division of streets or of river banks. Without attempting to investigate the historical background of the legend, I can discover some resonances with known details of Knanaya history. They did maintain spatial separation from other Christian communities (though not habitually favoring the south side or southern area of a place). The oral traditions of some locales in Kerala describe the Southists going to great lengths to keep physically separate from other groups (Census of India 1963, v. VII, pt. VII B(i): 259–260; 294–295). In several places—Kaduthuruthy, for instance—Southist churches stand a short distance away from large churches of the same denomination (Catholic) intended for non-Southists, or Northists. Legends which explain the Northist/Southist distinction as the result of divided settlements rationalize separate bazaars, neighborhoods and churches. There are only faint hints today of what may have been a much more pronounced residential opposition in the past. The legend, like the living arrangements it rationalized, has all but vanished.

THOMAS OF CANA'S TWO WIVES

The Northist/Southist legends all trace the division back to the arrival of the Syrian immigrants. A complex set of variants narrates the division as separation of two sides from a single point. A Society for the Propagation of Christian Literature missionary, the Reverend Thomas Keay, collected a legend (1938, 20) which further qualifies the Southist-Northist geographical division. The Southists, dwelling on the south bank of the Periyar, were the descendants of Thomas of Cana's union with a West Asian wife he had brought from Syria; the Northists, on the opposite bank, arose from his union with a native Nayar woman. This narration announces Southist *familial* legitimacy in the Malabar context. In traditional Malabar society the Nayars were a caste of warriors with a matrilineal social structure. They served the patrilineal Nambudiri Brahmins both in arms and by supplying them with concubines whose children were legitimate in Nayar matrilineages and at the same time excluded from the Brahmin patrilineages (Gough 1974, 319–323). Keay's story implies that the West Asian wife's children, the Southists, being descended within Thomas of Cana's patrilineage, are his legitimate heirs, while the Nayar woman's children, the Northists, are the heirs of her line only. This assigns a more specific value to the geographical division. The Southists are pure-blooded and socially

analogous to the high-born Nambudiri Brahmins; the Northists are the mixed blood offspring of a concubine.

Knanaya today very infrequently allude to the story of Thomas of Cana's two wives, but the older written sources contain numerous versions of the story. Keay's unnamed Southist informant used the story to legitimate his group over the Northists. Keay himself printed the tale to show that the native Christians are engaged in a bitter quarrel over legitimacy and require guidance from the outside. This has long been the reason why outsiders recount the two-wife narrative. The first reference to the two wives of Thomas of Cana is in a letter written by the Jesuit missionary Monserrate in 1579 (Brown 1982, 176). Monserrate remarks that both wives were noble Malabar women but one was a slave because she was born under an inauspicious sign. He does not specify the racial or caste identity of either wife, nor does he mention Southist or Northist descendants. Monserrate's letter simply tells of a division within a polygynous native family without particular consequence for subsequent history. Monserrate wishes to demonstrate that superstitious Malabar Christians require the firm hand of European ecclesiasts to discourage barbarous practices and achieve the restoration of authentic Christian faith. Monserrate's legend does not take either the Northist or the Southist side, but deprived of this crucial specific still serves his purpose. An early missionary trying to label the Malabar Christians from the outside could ignore the internal purpose of the narrative. Polygyny and reliance on astrology were enough to impress his superiors in Rome.

The Kerala ethnologist Ananthakrishna Ayyer extracted from the *Madras District Gazetteer* a version wherein Thomas married a Nayar wife, the mother of the Southists, and a Mukkuvan wife, whose children were Northists (1981 [1909], v. II: 437-438). To this Ayyer affixes the distinct legend of the settlements on two separate streets in Cranganore, with no further clarification. The Mukkuvan were a fisher folk living in their own communities along the coast of Malabar and occupying a "low state in the estimation of high-caste men" (Ayyer 1981 [1909], v. I: 275). In this narrative the two wives were both native Malabar women but one, the Nayar wife, was elevated and the other, the Mukkuvan, was degraded.

Ayyer's story is like Keay's but has a different frame of reference, the Biblical. Genesis 16 tells of the Egyptian handmaid Hagar who bears Abram's son Ishmael when his wife Sarai is unable to have children. Later Sarai, renamed Sarah, with divine aid gives birth to the heir of Abram, who has been renamed Abraham. It is with this son, Isaac, that the Lord establishes a covenant. Ishmael, destined to be

the father of a great nation (17: 28), will also become a wildman (16: 12) and an outcast. The narrative Ayyer presents retells the story of Sarah and Hagar in Malabar terms. It divides Thomas of Cana's progeny into two groups and gives one priority over the other in a Biblical line of legitimacy. The Southists have the relative advantage of being descended from a Nayar woman (while in the other version it was a disadvantage to the Northists) because it juxtaposes their higher warrior heritage to the outcast fishing life of the Northists' parent. Conforming their origin to the Biblical story of the origin of the Hebrews serves the Knanaya claim that they are in fact of Jewish origin (Vellian 1973, 73-74). The Nayar-Mukkuvan two-wife story invents a peculiarly South Indian tribe of Hebrews, the Southists.

Here again the division narrative locates the narrator within the social world of Kerala Christianity. Ayyer, a Hindu, Brahmin and an ethnologist schooled in British practice, prints this narrative to show how the Christians explain their divisions. Missing the Biblical parallel here as in several other places, Ayyer offers a version which makes the division between the two groups meaningful to him as a Hindu scientifically sensitive to caste differences. The gap between Nayar and Mukkuvan was much more significant to him than the gap between a West Syrian and a Nayar. Wishing to exposit the division he chose the most emphatic narrative. Unlike Monserrate, Ayyer was motivated by scientific inquiry into causes. He found an example of the legend socially significant to the larger Kerala community to which both he and the narrator belonged and he disregarded those elements idiosyncratic to Christians.

Contemporary Southists, the Knanaya, do not find the Nayar-Mukkuvan story intelligible. The caste differences upon which the narrative relies to achieve its Biblical analogy are not so strong today. The Southists do not ascribe Northist apartness to a polluted ancestress. They speak of Thomas of Cana's paternity, and of the two wives, but instead of identifying the social or caste standing of either they stress the divergent policies of the children. Those dwelling on the South side maintained rigid endogamy and did not welcome converts from low Hindu castes into their church while the Northists not only accepted converts but intermarried with them (Mundadan 1970, 97, n. 35). In one narrative I recorded from a Knanaya Jacobite priest, Thomas of Cana's two wives disappear entirely and the division is once again geographical in nature but now it is chiefly a division in conversion and marriage policy.

. . . The Christians who went to live in the north of Cranganore

accepted converts into their churches and they mixed together with them. The others remained pure. They resisted mixing.

This version responds to a present-day social issue: the admission of former "untouchables" into Christian ranks and their assimilation into Christian society. This is a "caste" matter within the Christian community. A group of "late" converts, the Latin Catholics, has taken shape in Kerala since the Portuguese domination. They themselves are divided into a number of ranked sub-groups (Ayyer 1926, 253-300), and despite their numbers have been confined to their own churches and barred from free intermarriage with the "older" Christians. The Latin Catholics have lately gained near equality to the Syrian Christians, though the stigma of their origins is recalled and intermarriage between Latin Catholics and the older Christian group is still difficult (Koilparambil 1982, 5-6; 264). There are yet more recent groups of converts who are "New Christians," and not even classed among the Latin Catholics. The Knanaya, ever sensitive to the issue of their purity, have developed a legend which extends the category of Northists to include all of these converts in a mass opposed to the stalwart Southists. This justifies the Southists' policy of endogamy as nothing less than sustaining down to the present the Patriarch of Antioch's ancient enjoinder to keep the faith and racial purity. The legend elides the Christian idea of Apostolic Succession with the Jewish identity as Chosen People. This Southist exclusiveness rejects the Northists' assertion of an open faith and an open social body into which any convert is welcome. Indeed the sharpest criticisms leveled against the Knanaya today accuse them of refusing to missionize as Christians must, by converting outsiders to a Christianity shared by all (Thenayan 1982, 138-142).

Bilateral division narrated as a difference in long-term policy is clearly milder than the various two-wife stories, which identify the Northists as low-caste mixed-bloods. Schoeps, the chief student of the Jewish Christians, has pointed to this policy division in the early Christian community (1949). These speculations have generated a large volume of scholarship on the role of Jewish law in early Christianity (Manns 1979). Jewish Christians did not accept converts not subject to the Jewish law in opposition to St. Paul's doctrine of open conversion. Intermarriage between Christians and converts was not an explicit issue but was subsumed into issue of conversion. The Southists' latest version of their division from the Northists is a response to the threat open conversion presents, and long has presented, to their integrity and sense of mission. The Southists speak with the same voice as the ancient Jewish Christians, but now as a party in a contemporary social cleavage

between old and new Christians.

The legend of the two wives of Thomas of Cana has been narrated to serve the purposes of different parties: to assert the superiority and exclusiveness of the Southists, to promote the image of Malabar Christians convenient to missionaries or to an ethnologist. Each version is spoken in a distinct voice within its context. Legends may nest within each other. Ayyer prints the words of a Southist asserting the racial superiority of Southists in Biblical terms. The ethnologist does not appreciate the Southist context of the narration but repeats the text in the context of British ethnology. The introduction of the two wives of markedly different castes establishes the greater prestige of one group of descendants, in these versions the Southists, and symbolically legitimates their Christian, Jewish and Hindu succession. Abandoning the device of the two wives, a narrator projects the communal concern for a pure, unmixed line of descent when facing the threat of amalgamation.

THE NORTHIST RESPONSE

The Southists obviously have not told their stories without a counter from the Northists, or the non-Southists. An article by an anonymous Catholic priest published in an English language Kerala newspaper on 26 March 1924 recounts the division of the Syrian immigrants but inverts the ranks of the parties formed (George 1964, 83-86). The Northerners were the "upper class" of the immigrants, including Thomas of Cana. They settled in the North of Cranganore, intermarried with the indigenous St. Thomas Christians, received a set of privileges from the monarch and were considered the equals of the Nambudiri Brahmins. The Southerners were their attendants and formed marriage alliances with the indigenous low caste converts. "The St. Thomas Christians sedulously kept themselves apart from the Southists. This is the origin of the two classes in Malabar." Both sides accept converts and intermarry but now the Northists ally themselves with the indigenous Christians (unmentioned or degraded in Southist versions) while the Southists, already a lower class, amalgamate themselves with new Christians of low rank and are consequently kept from associating with the Northists. They may worship in Northist churches but are relegated to "the lower half." This narrator is careful to approve the universal Christian communion but maintains that the Southists are "lower" members of that communion. The "purity" of the Southists is born of their exclusion from any intermixture with the higher orders of foreign or native Christians. The author states that this negates the "high pretensions" which the Southists express in their legends. An aged Syrian Christian woman echoed the attitude of

the 1924 article in informing me that the Southists today have great pretensions, but when she was young she and her family always recognized that they were "a little bit lower" than the Syrian Christians.

Other Northist stories are not so kind. They trace the origins of the Southists to a *dobi*, a washerwoman, whom Thomas of Cana took as concubine. The mother of the Northists is not even mentioned. Indeed, the narrative may be as simple as a remark referring to the Knanaya as "*dobi*'s children." "How can you spend your time with these *dobi*'s children?" It is widely understood that eminent high-caste men often took women of lower caste as mistresses or even as officially recognized concubines. This practice accords ill with Christian monogamy: making the Southists' mother a concubine is as bad as making her a *dobi*. The *dobi* slander debases Thomas of Cana's bloodline.

The Southists are called *accharan kettikal*, "ash-tiers," from the custom they reputedly once observed of carrying a little ash in the corner of the sari or dhoti. This, Northists explain, commemorates the *dobi* ancestress since *dobis* typically use wood-ash as a source of caustic soda in their washing work, and often appear sullied by the substance. Southists agree that they once tied ash but deny any descent from a *dobi*. A Knanaya agricultural laborer explained to me that the children of the Syrian immigrants played with the *dobi*'s children and spoiled her washing ashes, thus earning her curse and the ash-carrying practice. Other Knanaya insisted that the ash-tieing was in memory of the departure from Syria. Thomas of Cana's party burned all their houses and gathered the ash into their clothing to serve as a memento of the home country. Or, upon fleeing from Cranganore before the Muslim invaders arrived, the Southists burned their houses and bore away the ashes. Some Knanaya today feel that the ash tied into garments was the same ash handed down over the generations from the burning of houses in Syria or Cranganore.

The legend of the two wives of Thomas of Cana has been narrated to serve the purposes of different parties: to assert the superiority and exclusiveness of the Southists; to promote an image of Malabar Christians suited to the uses of missionaries or of ethnologists. Both stories agree that the ash-tieing practice sets the Southists apart, but disagree fiercely about its import. The issues are the same as in the other division narratives: purity/impurity of bloodline, legitimacy and continuity of tradition.

Northists attempted, however, to subvert Southist reactions to their version. In an elaborate story collected by Hambye, the translator of Cardinal Tisserant's volume (1957, 9n), the *dobi* was not Thomas of

Cana's concubine but merely under his protection. He married her to a boy of the Marar caste (a low caste) and the seven daughters born of this union married seven of the Syrian immigrants living on South St., giving rise to the Southists. This insulates Thomas of Cana entirely from the Southist bloodstream, matches a *dobi* with a low caste boy and introduces their blood into the pool of the Syrians. Numbering seven daughters married to seven male Syrians covers the Southist claim of having come to India in seven exogamous clans. This prevents the Southists from saying that the *dobi* married into only one clan and that clan fell away. All the clans are equally her offspring, and equally not descended from Thomas of Cana.

This legend derives the Southists from a *dobi*, removes them from Thomas of Cana's bloodline and runs down another of their pretensions at the same time. Perhaps there were other legends in which Southists took account of Northist legends degrading Southists and vice-versa. The remaining fragments suggest the bitterness of the antagonism between the two groups.

A Syrian Catholic journalist offered me a timely derivation of the Southists from the *dobi*.

One time the *dobis* working for the Maharaja of Cranganore went on strike. The Maharaja sent to Syria for new *dobis*. Their children are the Cananites.

Organized labor is very active in Kerala today and strikes are quite common. The Knanaya pride themselves in taking the role of labor negotiators. The seventy-second privilege accorded to Thomas of Cana is a prize accorded him for settling a dispute between Cheraman Perumal and his builders, who had fled to Sri Lanka. The merchant prince persuaded the builders to return and complete work on the king's palace. The Knanaya repeat the anecdote of this privilege to underline the antiquity of their communal negotiating skill. The journalist's story deflates this pretense by making the Southists descendants of *dobis* (ironically, Syrian *dobis*) and scabs at the same time. Two separate legends, Southist and anti-Southist, revolve around the subject of Southist negotiating skill and the boast of the seventy-second privilege.

Some individuals are in the unique position of being able to contrast opposed narratives which qualify one of the groups from separate social positions. I interviewed a Knanaya woman who against the strictures of her community had married a Latin Catholic man and thus suffered exclusion. She related that the Knanaya claim to be descended from a Brahmin woman but added that the Latin Catholics, themselves

considered of lowly origin, believe that the Knanaya are descended from a *dobi*. Juxtaposing the two stories she dismissed any high origin for the Southists and gave a glimpse of her own position. She narrated the division as a person who had moved from one social group to the other but could look back at the first and using its voice declare in her own group's voice the absurdity of any separation of Christian groups by supposed quality of descent.

QUARREL LEGENDS: THE OUTSIDE POSITION

Some division legends have neither Northist nor Southist narrators. European observers especially tended to show the Northists and the Southists actively quarreling together. The earliest European document to mention a division is a letter sent by the Jesuit Penteadó (c. 1518) who remarks that there was a dispute between the two sons of Thomas of Cana (Mundadan 1970, 97 n. 35). The letter does not name the sons nor does it state that their fight led to a social division; it only hints at a Cain-Abel conflict in the nascent community. Monserrate, as instanced in the discussion of the two-wife story, in 1579 makes the first reference to Thomas of Cana's two wives. He records no Northists or Southists, just an ignominious division. In 1603 the Jesuit J. M. Campori, in the train of Archbishop Roz as he made his episcopal tour of villages in Malabar, wrote a letter to the Jesuit general Aquaviva giving variants of the two-wife story and a picture of Northist-Southist relations (Ferroli 1939: 295-301):

. . . It is said, further, that this Armenian [Thomas of Cana] had brought his wife from Babylon, and that later on at Cranganore he took a woman of the country for his concubine; or according to others he took his legitimate wife from among the Thomas Christians, and a slave as his concubine. It is from this foreigner it appears that two races of those St. Thomas Christians were issued; although the first and greater part of these Christians descend from those who St. Thomas baptized at Mylapore and who later on, being violently driven away by wars, passed over to the Malabar coast. That Quinas Thome [Thomas of Cana], who professed the same faith, joined them and as he was rich and powerful he obtained great privileges from the King and put up his own capital or metropolis at Cranganore. In the two castes we have mentioned everyone pretends to descend from the legitimate wife, and contends that those of the opposite caste are descendants of the slave. Therefore they don't intermarry and in the bazaars they have separate churches for each caste. They communicate in everything else,

nevertheless there occur amongst them frequent quarrels and strifes.

This year there were so profound dissensions between two bazaars of different castes, that it was impossible to affect their reconciliation. They came to blows and on both sides some were wounded and killed.

The King of Cochin on whose territory were these two bazaars, sent his Nairs [Nayars] against the most aggressive; their bazaars were destroyed and plundered, but the two parties were not appeased. New murders were in contemplation, new calamities threatened the unfortunate community. But by the grace of God, the Lord Bishop put a stop to these mortal feuds.

Campori seems to stand outside the social divisions he describes by treating them equivocally. He narrates the origins of the division in alternative stories, and while stating that one wife was of a slave (or indigenous) origin he does not specify which group originated from which wife but reports that each identified the other with the low origin. Like Penteado and Monserrate before him he does not name Northists or Southists. A reader perceives two "castes" battling each other over precedence. The Northist or Southist narrators tell the legend each from a partisan viewpoint. The Jesuit narrators tell it from the viewpoint of European missionaries opposed to both Northists and Southists. Campori is the representative of an outside power which proposes to bring order to the irrationally divided natives. They can live in peace—he avers that they "communicate" in all things—if their meaningless differences are settled. That Archbishop Roz accomplished this proves that the Jesuits are able to manage the affairs of the Church in Malabar by distancing themselves from the petty quarrels of the locals. This also confirms that the Jesuits are more suited to this role than the King of Cochin, the Nayars or perhaps even European temporal authorities.

The Jesuit narration of the Christian division—anonimizing the two parties and making them appear childish—is a legend supporting one outside regime. The person who stands above the quarrel is the most effective ruler. Campori wrote his letter four years after the Synod of Diamper (1599) at which the Roman Church imposed a series of rigid restrictions upon the Malabar churches in an attempt to subordinate them and eliminate "irregularities" in doctrine and liturgy. The decline of Portuguese authority and the highly provoking seizure of a bishop sent from Syria by a Near Eastern patriarch precipitated the Coonen Cross revolt in 1653. The schism which followed split both Northists and Southists within themselves and generated a new legend

which occasionally runs at cross-purposes to the Southist-Northist stories. The Dutch seized Cochin in 1663, consolidating their power on the west coast of India. After them came the British, and a variety of colonial adventurers and travelers who encountered the Northists and Southists and wrote about them. Invariably they set down variants of the legend and called the two parties "castes." Whether the European narrators were aware of Campori's letter or not they described the native Christians from a similar position, from the outside, and proposed their narratives as scientific evidence for the prevalence of caste and caste-like divisions in Indian social life (e.g. Fuller 1977; Dumont 1980, 203). European versions of the legend vary greatly, but always come from the outside.

A good example is the work of Edgar Thurston. This British colonial administrator made a thorough study of the tribes and castes of South India and, in the sixth volume of his encyclopedic publication, presents the Northist-Southist division (1975, v. VI: 414-415). He retells a simple version of the two-wife story. According to Thurston, Thomas of Cana married two Indian ladies and sired the progenitors of the two separate groups. True to European practice from Campori onward he neglects to qualify the relative rank of the two wives. The "Southerners" simply refused to marry outside their group and thus "kept up their pride" leaving the title "Northerners" to all native Christians. Thurston, however, goes on to speculate that the division narrative "really" described much larger social events:

It is just possible that this legend but records the advent of two waves of colonists from Syria at different times, and from their settlement at different stations, and Thomas of Cana was perhaps the leader of the first expedition.

Thurston rejects the earlier European view that the division was just another petty squabble among natives. The division is not superficial, but the story of its origins in the two wives of Thomas of Cana is only a legend. Thurston writes a commentary which translates the legend into an impartial scientific narrative, another kind of legend.

The social customs of the two groups are in fact different. To evaluate the claim of racial difference between them he made anthropometric measurements. The results he summarizes in a pair of tables (1975, v. VI: 453-458). One of them sets a series of numbers (stature, cephalic index and nasal index) of thirty Syrian Christians separated into Northists and Southists, against corresponding numbers for forty Naryars; the other contrasts the stature and cephalic index of the two groups

with those for a people of Asia Minor, the Tadhadschy, who are said to typify the pure Armenian stock from which the Southists claim descent. If their statistical inadequacy (small sample) is ignored, the tables both imply that the Southerners, while different from the Northerners, do not resemble the Nayars or the Tadhadschy enough to be equated with them. Thurston does not comment on the tables; he just prints them. He has disqualified the legend of divergent physical origins.

Thurston's version of the legend, now become a negation of the original, is in the language of anthropometry and statistical tabulation. The Northist and Southist claims are both swept away by the advancing juggernaut of racial science. Today anthropometric evidence would be unacceptable criteria for the determination of racial differences or similarities. Thurston extends the original legend with a form of information that makes it relevant to his own society.

The European practice of narrating the legend from the outside by ignoring some information and adding variants was taken up by Kerala writers who wished to appear impartial and scientific. For instance *The Cochin State Manual* of 1911 and after it the *Travancore State Manual* of 1940 (218–219; Pillai 1940, v. I: 665). In the works of both Kerala and European scholars there has been an effort to site the legend precisely. The Cochin State Archaeologist Pisharotti published in 1927 an account (Menachery 1973, 154) of a version he collected in Kajur. This repeats the basic story of an ancient Northist/Southist division in Cranganore and follows the subsequent movements of each party. Brown (1982, 175–177) repeats the legend of Thomas' two wives and of separate north/south street settlements in Cranganore. He examines Monserrate's 1579 letter and evidence of similar divisions in the Brahman and Irava communities. He concludes: "The theory that the Northists are the descendants of converts, of St. Thomas or later evangelists, while the Southists are the more or less pure descendants of immigrants, is attractive." Like Monserrate, but less severely, he tries to find a legendary mean which dissipates the long quarrel.

RECLAIMING THE LEGEND

While Europeans and Keralites both tried to diminish the antagonism in the division by bringing together variants and historical detail, others attempted to tell the legend as a purely native story. V. Nagam Aiya criticized the French explorer Anquetil de Perron, who in 1758 had set out a division narrative including endogamous subdivisions in the Northist group (1906, v. II: 127). Aiya located two intermarrying groups of Northists on opposite sides of the river near Changanacheri in

south Malabar: Anquetil had confused these two with the greater Northist-Southist division, which did not allow intermarriage. Aiya then extends the division further back into Kerala history, contending that the Northist-Southist division *preceded* the arrival of the Syrian immigrants, who were absorbed into both groups. The antagonism between the Northists and Southists, in Aiya's narrative, arose from differences in conversion policy, the Northists being open and the Southists closed to new Christians. Aiya in effect makes the division into the aftermath of assimilation of Syrians into Malabar society. Aiya used the European critical legend style to create a Kerala legend of the two groups: they are divided doctrinally, not racially.

Projecting the legend onto other Kerala groups and into the Kerala past prior to the Syrian arrival makes it a legend for the larger Malayalam-speaking population that forms Kerala. Yet this version seems Aiya's peculiar invention. When others have found non-Christian instances of North/South division it was mainly to show it is not idiosyncratically Christian. Aiya proposes a division that belongs to the entire region. It was not widely accepted as a legend common to the Malabar and Travancore areas later merged to form the state of Kerala. In the same period, however, Southists also making use of the "impartial" European techniques, reclaimed the division legend for their own partisan purposes.

The social changes of the late nineteenth century included the advance of the Syrian Christians in economic power and social position. By obtaining Western style education and pioneering land in the interior they challenged the Nayars for preeminence in the social life of the Malayalam-speaking regions. This advance exacerbated the divisions within the Syrian Christian community. During the late nineteenth century there was agitation for the establishment of separate parishes and dioceses for the Southists within both the Roman Catholic and Jacobite denominations (Vattukuzhy 1973). Accompanying this agitation was a loud claim of Southist social and cultural uniqueness. Southist writers such as E. M. Phillipose wrote polemical articles in Christian journals and attempted to establish publications strictly to air the Southist case (Uthupan 1958, 42). This ("unfortunately," writes Leslie Brown) led to the establishment of a Southist Jacobite bishopric in Chingavanam (1910) and a Southist Catholic bishopric in Kottayam (1911).

Northist/Southist legends, whether authentically old or fabricated for polemics, entered into print during this period. The battle between Northists and Southists over ecclesiastical hegemony in both Catholic and Jacobite denominations is the context of some of the narratives cited

earlier. Older members of both groups still recall the harshness of the fight and complain that the other party waged the battle unfairly. Some Southists assumed an outside position the more to make the division their own.

Taking his inspiration from the essays of E. M. Phillipose, Joseph Chazhikaden conceived and promulgated a bold Southist legend. Chazhikaden was a representative of the strongly Southist area of Uzhavoor in the Diwan of Travancore and after the formation of Kerala in 1956 in the Kerala State legislature. He was a noted wit whose sallies were widely reported in newspapers and are still alive in oral tradition. In 1939 he published a Malayalam book whose English title, *The Syrian Colonisation of Malabar*, is not an exact rendering of its main Malayalam title, *Tekkumbhagasamudayam Charitram* [History of the Southist Community]. The book is a rambling collection of evidences for the noble origins and tradition of the Southists. A major section is devoted to a remarkably extended division narrative. Instead of beginning with the advent of the Syrian expedition in Malabar Chazhikaden pushes the division all the way back to Biblical times. The original Southists, his legend proposes, were the people of the Southern Hebrew kingdom of Judea. The Assyrians invaded and dispersed the Northern Hebrew kingdom, Israel, sending its people into exile and debasing intermixture. The Southern kingdom persisted, however, thanks to the protection of Alexander the Great, and its subjects retained both their racial and cultural uniqueness. The Romans finally conquered and destroyed the Southern kingdom but they could not compromise Southist cultural solidarity. When the Southists, who had turned to Christianity but still retained their identity, fled before the Muslim invaders to Canganore, Cheraman Perumal welcomed them but the native Christians, of Northist descent, spurned them when they refused to intermarry and dilute their blood.

Chazhikaden's Southists are unique from the most ancient time and their uniqueness is not Christian but Jewish. They are, in fact, the original Hebrews preserving that race and culture against a history that forever pushes for dispersal and the breaking of the vow. Quoting copiously from the Bible and from a potpourri of ancient historians and contemporary scholars, Chazhikaden tells a story of the migrations and tribulations of the Southists which leads to their emerging as the Southists of the Kerala Christians. Chazhikaden tells the legend from the Southist side but because he has assumed a far greater historical ambit for his people, his narrative merges, however fancifully, with the general history of the Near East and India. He can therefore interconnect Southist history with Roman, Jewish and Persian history, and

make it seem a part of the flow of events generally recognized.

Chazhikaden's book brought forth sharp condemnation from the Northists (Kurmanakan 1941) and ambiguous support from Southists. He "carefully" revised the book for republication in 1961, but never consented to or made an English translation. The book is still readily obtainable today from the Knanaya Catholic diocese bookstore in Kottayam. Contemporary Southists (Knanaya) tell Chazhikaden's legend. A Knanaya Catholic lay brother delegated by the bishop in Kottayam to answer my questions on the origins of the Knanaya and their customs narrated the Northist/Southist story after Chazhikaden but never acknowledged the source. Mrs. Theresa Mathews, a Knanaya lady residing in Kenya, published in 1980 a pamphlet, *The Knanayas or Southists*, which repeats the gist of Chazhikaden's narrative, stating that she has "drawn profusely from The Syrian Colonisation of Malankara." A high-ranking counselor of the Knanaya bishop informed me, however, that he had advised Mrs. Mathews not to publish her pamphlet. The same priest, an excellent scholar of Kerala Christian history, listened to a delivery of the Chazhikaden legend without disagreeing, yet later informed me that the story is incorrect and very misleading. Other Knanaya expressed serious reservations about Chazhikaden's work, and offered "older" versions of the division legend in its place. The Northists, or non-Southists, continue to deliver narratives and publish pamphlets (e.g. Jose 1983) refuting and ridiculing Southist pretense, such as Chazhikaden's.

Today there simply is a multiplicity, a pluralism, of legends. The same person may utter a fiercely partisan version then later criticize that version and offer a conciliatory alternate. There is no way to be sure that this was not always the case; that the content of individual legends says nothing definite about the identity of the teller. A legend may be snatched from the air and presented to make a point in a discussion. A person who has not lived in this environment cannot easily assess the role of the division legends in forming the expressing identity, which may be far less fixed than it is convenient for an outsider to assume.

Only the context can be observed. Recently there has been a move toward ecumenism in divided Indian Christianity. This emphasizes history and doctrine common to all the denominations. As foreign governance is reduced it becomes necessary to formulate an indigenous history of Christianity and to frame indigenous legends. This may also coincide with a growing homogenization of Kerala society as class divisions replace the former rigid caste divisions and intermarriage between Christian groups as well as with other religions grows more common. An ecumenical icon, the *St. Thomas Christian Encyclopedia*, published

for the 1900th anniversary of the martyrdom of the Apostle to India, St. Thomas, offers a field open for the play of a variety of even contradictory histories of the same events, including the Northist-Southist division. The contemporary legends described in this article are partially in the social context of Northist-Southist antagonism, but also in the increasingly pervasive context of Indian Christian ecumenicism. The division is increasingly narrated as common history of an emergent Indian Christianity. The division is "of the past"; it is consciously a legend.

CONCLUSION

This paper has laid out a number of instances of a legend of division within a South Indian Christian community. The legend's variations are the subject. No effort has been made to detect the historical underpinnings on the one hand or to determine the formal structure of the legend (which is not obvious despite the dualism). Instead each variant has been located in its context. It has been shown that each of the two parties tells its own self-aggrandizing variants, and those outside the conflict tell variants which serve their purposes of domination and proselytization. The legend is spoken or written in a variety of voices. A voice is an utterance of the legend in a context. And there are obviously many contexts, from pulpits to parties, in which the division may be given voice.

The one observation that can be made, and which comes close to characterizing the folklore of Northist/Southist division today, is that a voice should not be mistaken for an absolute statement of personal identity. I am not qualified to claim that Kerala identity is more fluid than other identities in the modern world. The great variety of performance forms in Kerala, including Christian Kerala, does insistently come to mind. Here, however, I merely note that the same person may deliver different versions of the legend in different contexts, or the same version in different contexts. It is a performance which may or may not have deep implications for the performer. There is no way to determine if this has always been the status of division legends. Those who are moved to speak of the division today are very conscious of the past: the division is always a matter of legend. I have showed how these legends are today, why their faintness in contemporary expression is not because they have died out. The folklore of Northist/Southist division is a folklore of its own situations. The emphatic, precisely reported texts which have priority in the Euro-American folklore theory and practice may not always be the best approach to folklore which is not said as much as meant.

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