

Food and Translation: Syrian Christian Cuisine as a Vehicle of Identity

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for the Award of the Degree of**

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By

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DECLARATION

I hereby affirm that the thesis entitled “**Food and Translation: Syrian Christian Food as a Vehicle of Identity**” is a bonafide research work done by me under the supervision of **Dr. Naresh Annem** and submitted to the University of Hyderabad for the award of the degree of MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY in Translation Studies.

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A part of this thesis has been presented in the following conference:

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Chapter 1:

Introduction

1.1 Overview

The growth of religion in Kerala is closely linked with the state's geographical positioning and foreign interactions. Those who wanted to travel east from the Mediterranean coast and West Asia by sea had to pass through Kerala. Also, Kerala's spices, especially pepper, further lured travellers and merchants from far and wide to the state. As trade flourished, many of these traders belonging to different religions stayed behind. Paired with the accommodating nature of the local rulers, this caused many religions to grow and flourish in the state.

Christianity in Kerala traces its origins to the first century A.D. when St Thomas allegedly came to preach in India and converted some of the residents of the state from Hinduism to Christianity. The Syrian Christians of Kerala claim that they are the descendants of these initial Christians. Rice, fish and vegetables are the primary staples of the community, like those of other communities in Kerala. They add coconut in most dishes, and coconut products are quite common. K.T. Achaya, in his *Indian Food Tradition: A Historical Companion*, says that the Syrian Christians had “few food taboos, but in the course of years some preferences have arisen from among local foods” (74). Having something liquid, like the *moru curry* with dry dishes and having something sweet after food, like curd mixed with plantains and sweet palmyra syrup etc., are some of the local practices that have influenced the community.

The trade along the spice route brought Christianity to the Kerala coast. The Jews who fled religious persecution in their home countries found hospitality in Kerala under tolerant rulers. Though the community did not interact much - religiously and culturally - with other communities

in Kerala, interactions mainly for trade have resulted in cultural exchange, including food practices. An example would be the *appam* believed to be of Jewish origin and has now become a Syrian Christian speciality. Trade with China brought utensils like the *cheenachatti* and *bharani*, and cooking methods associated with them came to Kerala.

When the Portuguese colonised Kerala, many settlers from Portugal intermarried with the Syrian Christians, causing a mix of culinary practices within families. The Portuguese and the British also set up seminaries in Kerala, and cooks were brought in from Europe to cook for the inmates. The dishes prepared by these cooks became popular among the natives through the community feasting that used to happen at these seminaries.

The culinary culture of the Syrian Christians is also related to their religious and cultural practices. Dishes like *Hosanna appam* and *Pesaha appam* were made to celebrate *Hosanna* Sunday and Maundy Thursday, respectively. *Pidi* was a delicacy served mainly for Christmas and Easter. In 1883 Rev. Samuel Mateer noted in his *Native Life in Travancore* that special meals of the Syrian Christians were served on plantain leaves and that the practice of folding an edge of the leaf was distinct to the Syrian Christians (58). Hence, we can say that the cuisine of the Syrian Christians has been influenced by ecology, local practices, trade and colonialism, and religious practices. This will be discussed further in chapters two and three.

By the 1950s, the recipes of the Christian cuisine in Kerala were being recorded and circulated. These recipes initially appeared in magazines and were later collected into books and targeted the upper-class women readers. They were bestowed upon newly married daughters as family heirlooms. Slowly these became popular among the middle classes too. These cookbooks containing recipes for both traditional foods and foreign foods like lemon meringues, puddings

and cakes, became an invaluable part of the Kerala middle-class household (Oomen). Despite the rich history of documentation in cookbooks and recipes, the food cultures of the Syrian Christians have not been subjected to much research. In contrast, studies have been done on its counterparts, the Malabar Mappilla cuisine and the Hindu culinary systems.

Food is an inalienable part of our lives. Apart from nourishing us physically, food, like language, is a system of signs that define and shape our cultural identities and works as a system of communication (Barthes 25). Hence, like any other system of signs, food can also be translated to different degrees. Unlike feeding undertaken by animals, eating is a cultural practice defined by social relations, associations, conventions and production (Kittler *et al.* 2). Being a cultural practice, it is also a marker of identity and plays a significant role in building solidarity among communities and in building boundaries around them. Also, as scholars like Lawrence Venuti have argued, translation is an act of “representation”. Hence, when food represents a community's identity, it translates the same to other communal groups. Thus, the language of food can be analysed to understand the politics of identity formation of different communities. In a globalised, multicultural and transcultural society where borders are being blurred or crossed, and food and cultures are being shared, the role of translation becomes essential.

1.2 Review of Literature

Latika George's *The Suriani Kitchen*, published in 2017, is a treasure trove for those who love to understand the culture of the people whose cuisine they are trying to reproduce in their kitchens. *The Suriani Kitchen* gives a culinary history of the Syrian Christians while giving the recipes of their famous dishes. The work provides us with a history of the Syrian Christians, their culinary practices and the differences between other communities.

Tanya Abraham's *Eating with History: Ancient Trade Influenced Cuisines of Kerala* (2020) is not just a recipe book. It gives a glimpse into the culture and tradition of Kerala through its cuisine. The numerous recipes of Kerala communities that have come under foreign influences are well represented in this book. These recipes, cherished by the families and handed down generations, have a history of cross-cultural interactions with Jews of the Paradesi and Malabari sects, Syrian Christians, Muslims, Anglo-Indians¹, Latin Catholics² and others who mingled with and evolved from the local populace. The book is well researched and provides a rich cultural history of foreign food culture, tracing how the new elements adapted to local food traditions and evolved as a parallel line of foods, creating new textures, flavours and tastes. The book is a rich source of information for all those who aim to research Kerala's culinary tradition, especially of the Christian communities in Kerala.

In "Towards a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption" (1998), Roland Barthes described food in terms of highly structured signs and argues that food habits can be considered as signifiers as they transmit messages and provide information. He defines food as a signifying entity, a system of communication, and talks about a "spirit" of food which is a "coherent set of food traits and habits that can constitute a complex but homogenous dominant feature useful for defining a general system of tastes and habits" (Barthes 26). He then explains that food as a signifier refers to three themes: the commemorative function, the anthropological situation and a

¹ Descendants of the Portuguese, Dutch, French and English who married natives of Kerala and settled down in the state.

² Catholics who follow the Roman Rite of the Latin Church and who constitute the ecclesiastical provinces of Verapoly and Trivandrum in Kerala.

health or nutritional consciousness. In this case, Syrian Christian food practices can be seen as a system of communication, and it is possible to find what it signifies and refers to.

“The Work of Representation” by Stuart Hall in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997), connects language and representation and describes how meaning is produced through representation and defines representation as "using language to say something meaningful about ... [the world] to other people" (15). It connects language to culture and describes how shared conceptual maps can be translated into a language for communication. By considering language as any signifying system, it provides a framework to identify how identity is translated through the language of food.

K.T. Achaya's *Indian Food: A Historical Companion* gives a history of the Indian food tradition from prehistoric times to the modern era. It provides an insight into the cultural values that bind the various cuisines of India and their close association with the environment. In describing regional cuisines, the book mentions how the Kerala cuisine is majorly divided into the Mappilah, Hindu, and Christian cuisines and mentions several elements of the Syrian Christian cuisine. It gives an overview of the cuisines of several communities of Kerala and helps to look at the cuisine of the Syrian Christian community in connection to those of other cultural groups in Kerala.

Anthropology of the Syrian Christians by L.K. Ananthakrishna Ayyar, published in 1926, gives an academic insight into the life of Syrian Christians of Kerala in the twentieth century. It is a detailed work on the Syrian Christians, their history, practices, religion, culture, social organisation, occupation etc. Samuel Mateer's *Native Life in Travancore*, published in 1883, is a foreign traveller's account of the people of Travancore, among whom the Syrian Christians occupy an

important position. As a pioneer of indigenous churches in Kerala, he also had close relationships with the people. Though it contains many biases of a British priest's perspective on a colonised country, it is beneficial for a comparative study of the different communities in Kerala in the nineteenth century.

Though A. Sreeshara Menon's *Survey of Kerala History* (2010) is not a comprehensive history of Kerala, it gives a general understanding of the state. While writing this history, the author has taken into account the geographical, economic, religious, and cultural aspects of Kerala and gives a history that is not blindly based on legends, as most histories of Kerala, before this book, have been, according to the author. *Maritime India: Trade, Religion and Polity in the Indian Ocean* are a collection of essays by Pius Malekandathil, published in 2010, which studies the impact, various ideas, people, and goods that came to India through the Indian Ocean had on the country. It uses Indian and foreign sources to trace the country's historiography in relation to the influence of maritime links on the socio-economic and political conditions of India through the different periods of history. The focus is mainly on the influence of the Portuguese. As a religious community that originated and flourished through maritime trade relations, the Syrian Christians and their culture and history feature prominently in this book.

The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation (2017) by Lawrence Venuti examines translation, its strategies and practices from the 17th century. In this book, Venuti describes how translation is considered as a representation of the original, and the accepted translation practice in translating foreign literatures to English has been to give the most faithful representation possible in terms of fluency. The conception of translation as a representation provides the base for the argument in the dissertation that representation of identity can be considered as a translation of identity.

Claude Fischler's "Food, Self and Identity", published in 1988, gives an insight into how food is central to our identity, how identity is constructed through food and how culture defines this identity through its control over food. The author defines cuisine as a body of representations based on classifications and opines that we understand food through these classifications. He identifies four levels of classifications – on the level of what is edible and what is not, on the level of cultural norms and taboos, propriety and contexts, and on the level of nutritional concerns.

“Food & Identity: A Global Approach” by Greta G. *et al.* discusses how food acts as a vehicle for expressing culture and identity by taking case studies of Mexico, Barcelona, Italy and Vietnam. They have, through several articles, identified different markers of identity in food and the effect of globalisation on representation through food. In "Exploring Indian Culture through Food" (2011), Tulasi Sreenivas opines that “Food in India is an identity marker of caste, class, family, kinship, tribe affiliation, lineage, religiosity, ethnicity, and increasingly, of secular group identification”. The author believes that India began to gastronomically define itself in the face of colonisation that began in the twelfth century. Keeping this in mind, the author looks at the history of India and of its culinary imagination, the symbolism of Indian food, the gastronomic calendar of India and finally, the Indian food in an era of globalisation. It is an interesting read for anyone looking to research the food culture of India as it gives an idea of both the ethnic cuisine of India before colonisation and the influences of the foreign cultures on Indian food.

Jean-Jacques Boutaud *et al.* in their “Food and Culture: Cultural Patterns and Practices Related to Food in Everyday Life” (2016), define food as a cultural activity and show how food becomes a marker of identity and defines aspects like social class, gender roles, personality, lifestyle, relationships, etc. *Food and Culture* by Pamela Goyan Kitler *et al.*, published in 2012, is mainly a detailed study of the food habits of the North American ethnic groups. It also includes, in brief,

the dietary practices of some western and eastern religions. The book places food habits within the context of culture and also suggests some strategies of communication between different cultures through food. Massimo Montanari's *Food is Culture*, published in 2006, takes further the presumptions of Barthes and Strauss and gives a detailed analysis of the language of food and the cultural acts involved in the production, preparation, and consumption of food. He defines taste as a product of society and explains how practices, beliefs, and conceptions of food are all shaped by discourse and are subject to change over time. He gives a cultural understanding of food rather than an economic or nutritional analysis.

In her essay "Food, Language and Identity" (2011), co-authored with Marc Charron, Renee Desjardins views food as a pivot between divergent identities, a cultural mediation or translation. The article looks at the points of intersection between food and translation studies - food and cultural transmission, concepts of familiarity and resistance through regional and national foodways, and consuming the other and packaged food. Thus, her article establishes food as a translation that lets different identities communicate.

In his "Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia", published in 1981, Arjun Appadurai studies the role of food in social organisation in southern Asia. He introduces the term Gastro-politics and defines it as the "conflict or competition over specific cultural or economic resources as it emerges in social transactions around food" (ibid). He looks at "what particular actions involving food (and particular foods) "say"? To whom? In what context? With what immediate social consequences? To what structural end?" (Appadurai 495). He examines how food, through its powerful semiotic properties, has contributed to the proliferation of caste differences and has secured caste boundaries. The essay explains how the consumption or production of food is a political one, especially in terms of identity. By looking at what particular actions involving food say, one can

understand how these actions define the Syrian Christians identity to others and themselves and the political consequences of this definition.

“Preservation of Local Cuisine: A Comparative Study of Syrians Christians and Moplah Community Cuisines in Kerala” by Aashish Gupta *et al.* compares the popularity of Syrian Christian and Moplah cuisines in the Kerala tourism sector and gives an insight into the cuisines.

Despite many histories and theses written on the Syrian Christian community, little in-depth study has taken place about their cuisine. Also, the interest in food by scholars of Translation studies is a very recent phenomenon. Most of these researches have looked at interlingual translation of food names and the problems of translating texts related to food. In fact, Chiaro and Rossato find that the relationship between food, culture, and translation is under-researched. The special issue of the *Translator* brought out in 2015 on food and other works have since tried to bridge this gap. Also, though research has been done on food, language, translation, and food and identity, research that connects all of them is lacking, especially about the Syrian Christian food and the translation of their identity. Hence, the current study attempts to fill this gap by considering cuisine itself as a language that can represent the identity of a community. The study is a preliminary attempt to approach cuisine from an inter-semiotic translation perspective by looking at how food represents the identity of the Syrian Christian community of Kerala, India, thereby translating their mental concepts of identity into the language of food. Here, representation is considered as a translation by employing Lawrence Venuti’s concept of translation as the process of representing the original.

1.3 Research Questions

1. How did the local culinary traditions, the trade relations of Kerala with other countries and colonialism shape the culinary practices of Syrian Christians?
2. How is the Syrian Christian identity represented through their cuisine?

1.4 Objectives

1. To trace the culinary practices of the Syrian Christian community of Kerala.
2. To find how the Syrian Christian identity is represented through their cuisine.

1.5 Methodology

In this research, a qualitative analysis of sixteen food items which are part of the Syrian Christian cuisine, including everyday foods, snacks and delicacies, festival foods, and desserts is done to find how it represents the community's identity. Apart from this, the consumption of alcohol by the community is also looked at as the community is the highest consumers of alcohol in Kerala and alcohol consumption has become a part of the community's identity.

The food items have been analysed by looking at their ingredients, processes and practices surrounding its preparation, beliefs surrounding them, rituals and taboos relating to its consumption, and use of the food items by the community in their cuisine to reach at conclusions about how these food items represent their Identity and how ecology, religion, and local traditions have influenced their cuisine.

The recipes of food items and some background information about them have been taken from mainly two cookbooks *The Suriani Kitchen* and *Eating with History: Ancient Trade Influenced Cuisines in Kerala*. Information about the community's food culture has been collected from various anthropological studies, writings of European missionaries, and newspaper articles.

The dissertation uses Levi Strauss' idea of cuisine as a language, Stuart Hall's idea of language as a representational system that can translate our thoughts, Lawrence Venuti's conception of translation as a representation, and other theories of food and identity among others.

1.6 Limitations

The researcher had to depend on her knowledge of the Syrian Christian community and their food practices and the beliefs among the community about the origin of certain food items due to the lack of in-depth academic study about the food practices of the community. Also, due to time constraints and constraints of resources, the researcher has not taken into account the variations in the Syrian Christian cuisine due to class, regional, and sect differences among the Syrian Christians.

1.7 Organization of Dissertation

This dissertation is organised into four chapters. Chapter 1 – Introduction - contains a general introduction, review of literature, objectives, research questions, and methodology. Chapter 2 - The Syrian Christians of Kerala: An Overview - includes information on the Syrian Christians, their history, culture, and identity. Chapter 3 is, Representing Syrian Christian Identity through Food and contains an analysis of sixteen Syrian Christian dishes and how they represent

the identity of the Syrian Christians. Chapter 4 will be the Conclusion and includes a conclusion of the findings and significant points in the dissertation. Finally, a list of works cited is also given.

Chapter 2:

The Syrian Christians of Kerala: An Overview

2.1 Introduction

To understand how food represents the identity of the Syrian Christians, one must understand the Syrian Christian identity itself. This chapter discusses how the Syrian Christians of Kerala, the oldest Christian community in India, was formed, the factors that influenced their customs, beliefs, and practices, their social position within the larger Kerala community, and also the ecological, religious, and cultural factors, like the maritime trade and Jewish and Hindu influences, that formed their cuisine. Major events of celebrations in the life of a Syrian Christian from childhood to marriage is also discussed to give some insight into how important food is to the celebrations of these life events for them.

2.2 Kerala: The Land and Maritime Trade

Kerala was formed as a state under the Indian Union on the 1st of November, 1956. Before, it was composed of the erstwhile regions of Cochin, Malabar, South Canara, and Travancore. According to a legend in Hindu mythology, the state came out of the Arabian Sea when Lord Parashuram, supposedly one of the ten avatars of God Vishnu, threw his axe into the sea. Though the legend itself does not have any historical or factual basis and, according to scholars and historians, was concocted to justify Brahmin predominance, historians like A. Sreedhara Menon have commented upon how the geological and geographical features of Kerala may have influenced the legend.

Mahakavi Vallathol Narayana Menon has poetically described the geographical positioning of Kerala in his “Salutation to the Mother”:

The mother reclines

Her head on the green-clad Sahya Hills

Her feet encushioned on the sandy beach.

Guarding her on either side

Stand the Lord of Gokarna and the Goddess Kumari. (Vallathol 46)

The natural barriers protecting the land - the Indian Ocean on one side and the Western Ghats on the other – and the resulting geographical isolation has helped Kerala to develop and have its unique culture -to an extent- without being subjected to overpowering influences from the northern part of the country and from foreign countries for a long time. In its way, the almost impenetrable Western Ghats have shielded the land from the political turmoils that shook Northern India or have at least delayed their impact on the state. Being bordered by the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, the state developed its own maritime tradition and became a cultural melting pot, a cosmopolitan centre. Trade links with Europe and Asia were established and flourishing since very early days. These contacts were mainly cultural and commercial in character throughout the ancient and early medieval eras. The major seaports of ancient Kerala were Muziris, Tyndis, Barace, and Nelcynda. Ports such as Quilon, Calicut, and Cochin came into prominence in the later periods of Kerala history (Menon 17). Religions like Christianity, Judaism, and Islam came to the state through the sea. They were received warmly by the local rulers and inhabitants of the state, causing an amalgamation of cultures and religions. It was only from the later part of the fifteenth century, after the arrival of Vasco da Gama, that Kerala was subjected to colonial onslaughts by the European

powers. Historians like Pius Malekandathil have done extensive research on the influence that the sea and the maritime tradition of the state have on its history and culture.

From the 3rd millennium B.C., Kerala's fame as the land of spices brought foreign peoples and cultures to her shores. Ancient Kerala had trade relations with the Arabs, the Assyrians, Babylonians, the Greeks, the Romans, and the Chinese. The Assyrians and Babylonians, who had their empire in the 3rd and 2nd millennia B.C. in ancient Sumer (Mesopotamia or Iraq), conducted extensive trade in cardamom and cinnamon from the Kerala coast (Menon 57). There are records of the use of spices from Kerala in the making of perfumes and holy oils used in the process of mummifying in Ancient Egypt (Menon 57). We can also find references to spices that are indigenous to Kerala in the Old Testament of the Bible. Cinnamon was one of the ingredients used to make the holy anointing oils and perfumes, which were used in the ritual of Tabernacle by Moses in the wilderness of Sinai in 1490 B.C. Another reference is to the train of camels bearing spices that Queen Sheeba brought with her to Jerusalem.

The Arabs are speculated to be the first to have undertaken long voyages to the Kerala coast and other regions of the East (Menon 58). Historians like Sreedhara Menon and J.W. Parry also speculated about the possibility of the presence of a land route for spice trade that connected Kerala and the Middle East via the Indus Valley in the 3rd millennium B.C. Apart from the Arabs, the Phoenicians were also expert seafarers and traders who conducted trade with Kerala. The proof of the Phoenician trade in Kerala can be found in the Bible. The seafaring Phoenicians, known for their commercial prowess (referred to in the verses as the "servants of Hiram" and "sailors who knew the sea"), manned the fleet of ships that King Solomon sent to Ophir to collect gold in 1000 B.C (1 Kings 9: 28-26). Ophir is now prominently believed to be Puvar in Trivandrum or Beypore in Calicut, though some argue that the place lies nowhere in Kerala (Menon 58). But the argument

that the fleet came to Kerala demands merit as the other items that the said ships carried included ivory, peacocks and monkeys, all indigenous to Kerala.

For the king had the ships of Tarshish at sea with Hiram's fleet, and once every three years, the ships of Tarshish would arrive bearing gold, silver, ivory, apes, and peacocks (1 Kings 10:22).

Towards the end of the era before Christ, Greeks and Romans established trade relations with Kerala. The major spices traded during these years were ginger, turmeric, and pepper. After the Roman conquest of Egypt in the 1st century B.C., they actively entered the spice trade, breaking the monopoly that the Arabs had over it till then. Pliny and Ptolemy record the draining of Roman gold and silver into South India in return for luxuries like spices, silk, and muslin. Pepper or the 'black gold' or 'yavanapriya' made the most of this cargo due to the high demand for this aromatic spice.

It is believed that the trade relations with the Chinese began in the early years of the Christian era, though some scholars suggest that it existed before trade relations were established with the Greeks and the Romans (Menon 60). Though a late entry into Kerala's maritime trade, the trade relations with the Chinese was a very long one.

Apart from foreigners coming to Kerala to trade, the people of Kerala too ventured into the seas to distant lands in search of commerce. References to such voyages are present in the early Sangam works like those made by poetess Kakkai Patiniyar in the sixth decade of *Patittupattu* (Menon 60). The flourishing indigenous oceanic trade can also be attested to by the presence of trade organisations like *Anchuvanam*, *Nanadeshikal*, and *Manigramam*, which engaged in foreign trade,

of which Manigramam was the trade guild of the Syrian Christians while Anchuvanam was the Jewish trade guild.

The cultural and religious exchanges resulting from these flourishing maritime relations created what could be called a cosmopolitan culture in Kerala. The cultural effect of these interactions was not just felt in Kerala but also in those foreign countries. Indian ideas and practices contributed substantially to the form of Christianity that got accepted in the West. "Monasteries and nunneries, tonsures, rosaries, confession, and celibacy, all seem to have found its way to Europe from Indian sources" (Logan 254).

Hence, we can see that Kerala's maritime trade brought several cultures and religions to its shores, including Christianity, which has influenced the state's cuisine. The isolation offered by the geographical condition of the state nurtured these new religions and provided conditions for them to develop in their own unique way.

2.2 Syrian Christians of Kerala

There are many theories of the origin of Christianity in India, of which there are two major ones. One is that the foundation of the Christian church in India was laid by Saint Thomas, one of the twelve Apostles of Jesus whose sphere of evangelical work, according to Cardinal Tisserant, included India. The other is that Christianity was introduced by the Christian missionaries and merchants belonging to the East Syrian and Persian churches (Tisserant 10). At the dawn of the Christian era, there were trade routes connecting West Asia and the East. The land routes reached parts of North India, while the sea routes reached the coast of Kerala and other parts of South India. (Mundan 21).

According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*:

The origins of Christians of St. Thomas are uncertain, though they seem to have been in existence before the 6th century A.D. and probably derive from the missionary activity of East Syrian (Nestorian) church ... Despite their geographic isolation, they retained the Chaldean liturgy and Syriac language and maintained fraternal ties with the Babylonian (Bagdad) Patriarch: their devotional practices also included Hindu religious symbolism, vestiges of Syrian Christians to their early religion ("Thomas Christians").

In 345AD, a group of merchants came from Persia, reinvigorating Kerala's existing Christians.

According to Julius Richter:

In the year 345 AD there landed in Malabar according to the tradition of Thomas Christians of south India, under the convoy of a Jerusalem merchant Thomas, a bishop from Edessa, accompanied by Presbyters and deacons, and by a company of men and women youths and maidens from Jerusalem, Bagdad and Nineveh ... They were welcomed with great rejoicing by the Christians of the country, and endowed with important privileges by the ruler of the land so that their arrival was the beginning of a flourishing epoch in the history of Malabar Church (30).

The rulers of the land favoured this community and the foreign Christian merchants of the East since the revenue they produced and the increased trade relations gave these rulers political and economic advantages. An example of this patronage is the set of commercial privileges granted to migrant traders like Mar Sapor and Mar Prodh from erstwhile Sassanid Persia by the ruler of the

Ay kingdom in the mid-ninth century. The indigenous Christians of the hinterlands, who used to produce spices, had economic linkages with these foreign Christian merchants from Persia, who had access to wide trade networks along the Indian Ocean. Hence grants and patronages given to these migrant merchants bolstered the evolution of Christians as a significant trading group in Kerala and gave them the economic identity of Vaishya or the trading class. In the caste system, they were equal to the Nairs (Malekandathil 39). Their prosperity is documented by Bishop John Marignoli (c. 1346), who referred to Christians of Quilon as “rich people” and “owners of pepper plantations” (Malekandathil 45).

The St. Thomas Christians were also recruited as a fighting force for the local rulers, especially after the disintegration of the Cheras. Most Christian settlements had their own kalaris run by the Christian *Panikkars*, and where there was no Christian kalaris, they had to join the kalaris run by the Nairs. They even had *Chaverukal* (suicidal squads) under their commands like the Hindu military communities, and they used to attend church services carrying their swords, shields, and lances. In 1546 the king of Vadakkankur offered the Portuguese 2000 soldiers from the St. Thomas Christian community to lift the Ottoman siege on Diu. The military tradition became so much a part of this community's culture and living that they formed a *chaverppada* to protect their bishop Mar Joseph from being arrested by the Portuguese in 1555 (Malekandathil 46).

The social and political changes that came about with the advent of Brahmanism in Kerala, the development of Brahmanical ideology, and temple centred activities that reshaped the social structure of Kerala by dividing the various artisan and professional groups into castes and subcastes in the ninth to thirteenth centuries, also defined the social functions of the Christians. As mentioned before, the Christians, whose main profession was trading, were given a caste position similar to that of the Vaisyas of the areas north of Vindhyas and Satpura. The Brahmans of the

state supported the Christians in their trade endeavours as they wanted to undermine the hold of Jains and Buddhists - whose main source of income was from trade - whom they saw as a serious threat to their Brahmanical hegemony.

The landing of the Portuguese marked the advent of a new epoch- an epoch of Roman Catholic Mission in India. They sought to bring the indigenous Christians under the See of Rome and cleanse them of what the Portuguese thought unchristian practices. The Portuguese were intent on proselytising, and they even adopted Christian families into their forts and tried to wrest the authority over the Christians from the local rulers.

Religion and State were not distinguished from each other in Portugal. Hence, the Sovereign of Portugal set about a proselytising mission in India. Pedro Alvares Cabral, Portuguese nobleman and military commander, who led the second Portuguese expedition to Kerala in the 1500s, began an active interaction with the Christians of Kerala and hoped to bring the Syrian Christians under the See of Rome. The Roman Catholic Padroado missionaries, especially Alexio de Menezes and Francis Ros, took upon an extensive reform in the Syrian Christian churches and sought to bring them under the control of the Roman Catholic Church after the death of the last Metropolitan appointed by the Patriarch of the Chaldean Church. The Synod of Diamper was an attempt to cleanse the Christians of Kerala of what the Portuguese thought to be heathen ways.

In 1599, a diocesan council was called with leaders and priests of the Syrian Christian churches. About two hundred decrees were passed in this council, which subjugated the Kerala church to the customs, laws, rituals and rites of the Portuguese and the Roman Catholic Church. Though many of the decrees passed brought significant reforms such as reducing slavery and caste discrimination, the indigenous Christians were not happy with what they felt to be Portuguese

invasion into their cultural and religious practices. Also, the decrees passed, though signed by the attendees, were not discussed democratically, and some canons were added after the Synod by Menezes.

There were not much [sic] discussions at the Synod ... priests delegated by the Archbishop alone were permitted to speak at length at the Synod ... after the Synod, Menezes added various canons. The canons written in Portuguese had 30 additional laws that were not there in Malayalam ... many laws that were not even read at the Synod were subsequently added and spread across the world (“Synod of Diamper or Udayamperoor Synod”).

In 1653, a group of Christians under the guidance of Archdeacon Thoma gathered at Mattanchery church and took an oath not to follow the Portuguese and the Roman Catholic Church. These Nasranis tied a rope to the cross at the church so that everyone could touch the cross while taking the oath. It is believed that the cross bent due to the weight of the people, and hence the oath is called the Coonen Cross Oath (Oath of the Bent Cross). This brought about a permanent schism in the previously united Christians of Kerala. The sect which continued their allegiance to the Roman Catholic Church was called the *Pazhekkoottukar*, and those who left it and proceeded to follow the Patriarch of Antioch was called the *Puthenkoottukar*.

2.3 The Major Life Events Celebrated in a Syrian Christian’s Life from Birth to Marriage

As the state enjoyed relative seclusion from the outside world, the culture and practices of the Syrian Christians developed mainly along the lines of the Hindu community in Kerala. The community describe itself as Hindu in culture, Christian in religion, and Syrian in the liturgy (Stang 17). But influences of Jews, Persians, Portuguese, and Dutch can be seen in the community.

Whether the origin of the community was due to the proselytisation of St Thomas, one of the twelve Disciples of Christ, or due to that of the Eastern Churches, the influences of Jewish customs and traditions can be seen in the community. These influences could have been due to the teachings of St Thomas or due to the influence of the Persian churches. Another source of influence could have been the Jewish community who set up their lives in Kerala in 68 A.D. Since the Syrian Christians had little to no religious guidance after the Saint left, they might have looked to the Jews for guidance. As communities engaged in trade, they had constant interactions, the proof of which can be found in the Tarisappally copper plates that granted special privileges to Mar Sapor and Syrian Christians in 850 A.D., on which there are Jewish signatories. As the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the British colonised the state one after the other, they and their missionaries influenced the Syrian Christian community with their religious practices and beliefs, customs and traditions and most importantly, with their food. Of this, the Portuguese had the most lasting impression.

From the time a child is born in a Syrian Christian family, it is introduced to its customs and traditions. When a child is born, a horoscope is made by the Kaniyan for the child. This practice is a vestige of their ties to the Hindu religion. Though not widely practised today after continuous reformations, some families still follow the tradition. The newborn child is fed powdered gold and honey, a ritual common to the Hindu community. It is believed that doing so would make the child sweet spoken and his words valuable as gold.

Baptism is the first and the most important of the seven sacraments of Christianity. During Baptism, children are accompanied by their sponsors or Godparents. The rites of Baptism observe Mosaic laws, and the child is anointed with holy oils. The child's name is taken from the Bible, mainly from the New Testament. These names are of Hebraic origin, and some Greek and

Armenian forms of the Biblical names are used (Mateer 218). Some common names include John, Joseph, Mathew, Kurien, and George. The older generations used to have a nativised form of Syrian names. For example, Peter becomes Poonen, Paul - Peili, and Zachariah - Tarien.

Along with the rites of Baptism, other rituals were also followed. These included exorcising evil spirits, mixing warm and cold water for Baptism, following the belief that John the Baptist did so while Baptising Jesus. The Baptised person is given the priest's gold girdle and a crown, which is later removed with a prayer that the child receives a crown of glory instead. Though not all of these rituals are not practiced today due to the proselytising of European missionaries, vestiges can be found till date. After the Baptism, a baptismal feast is organised and is partaken by all who comes to bless the child and witness the child's regeneration in Christ.

When the child becomes a year old, the child is fed rice for the first time, and it is celebrated among the family members. The maternal grandparents gift the child ornaments during this *chorunnu* ceremony. When the child becomes three or four years old, the child's education starts officially. A ceremony called *Vidhyarambham* is performed to initiate the studies. In older days, the child would be taken to a teacher, and the teacher would make them write “*Om Hari Shri* ” in a brass vessel filled with rice in front of a lighted lamp. The mantra is said to signify all 51 Devanagari letters that form the embodiment of the *Naadarupini Devi*- the Goddess of Sound. The teacher used to be given *Dakshina*, an offering of money along with betel leaf and nut. These days, the parents, family members, or respected members of the community perform the role of the teacher. Both *chorunnu* and *Vidhyarambham* are very important and prominent among the Hindus in Kerala. Among the Hindus, on the day of *Vijayadashmi*, people gather at temples to perform the ritual of *Vidhyaarambham*. Rev. Samuel Mateer observes that marriage among the Syrian Christians is only forbidden to the higher order of priests (160). Until the 20th century, the

remarriage of widows was considered as something shameful, even though not prohibited. Hence, these marriages used to occur early in the morning before daylight. Inter-marriage between blood relations from either side is forbidden to the seventh generation. Rev. Samuel Mateer, the author of *Native Life in Travancore*, disapproves of this rigidity in marriage relations. The Syrian Christians too used to cast the fortunes of young couples from their ages and horoscopes, though it is against the teachings of Christianity.

Marriages are celebrated in a big way among Syrian Christians. In earlier days, the celebrations, especially the feasts used to go on for days, and the marriage feast contained, and still contains fish, fowl and vegetables. Marriages are celebrated mostly on Sundays, except among some churches like the Marthoma and the CSI, who keep the holy day aside for prayers and rest. Traditionally, the bride's dress used to be *chatta* and *mundu*, either white or coloured, and they used to be laden with borrowed jewellery and strings of coins of gold were hung around the neck (Mateer 220). The bride and the groom are ideally supposed to fast on the day of marriage till the ceremony is over. Hence, they are allowed to sit in the church during the ceremony. Even during the marriage feast, the bride and the groom are supposed to eat only after all the guests have had their food. Rev. Mateer in the 19th century observed that, even though refreshments are offered to the couple after the ceremony, they either decline the food or eat only a tiny portion, and the wife could eat only if the husband accepted the food. These practices may not be uniform for all the different sects, and many of them are not practised by everyone in the modern days.

Unlike in western countries, where the Christian couples are wedded using a ring, the Syrian Christians of Kerala are married using a *thali* – a chain made of 7 threads from the *manthrakodi*, the first sari given to the bride by the groom after the marriage, with a *minnu*, a locket in the shape of a banyan leaf. The *minnu* of the Syrian Christians has the symbol of a cross on it, and the seven

threads of the *thali* represent the bride, the groom, their parents, and the last one for the church or the society. There are many rituals that are observed post marriage at the house of the groom.

Nellum-Nirum (Rice and Water) and *Madhura Kodukkal* (Giving Sweet) are two important rituals that are conducted after marriage. In *Nellum-Nirum*, before they enter the groom's house, the couple is welcomed by a female relative with a lamp in her left hand and a vessel with powdered rice mixed in water in her right. The relative makes a mark, usually a cross, on the forehead of the husband and the wife. Rice and water are seen as symbols of prosperity, and the ritual is conducted so as to bless the couple with a life of abundance. Rev. Samuel Mateer has commented that the privilege of lighting a lamp in broad daylight was one enjoyed by the Syrian Christians. The practice of *Madhura Kodukkal* has its origins in the traditions of the Cochin Jews of Kerala. In this custom, the bride and the groom are fed with sweets by the close relatives to sweeten their life forward and in the happiness of the alliance. Another important ritual is the *Kachakodukkal* (Gifting Cloth). After taking permission from those gathered, the groom presents four pieces of cloth to his mother-in-law, uncle, grandmother, and father. After the fabric is gifted, each embraces the bridegroom. In earlier days, celebrations used to happen over many days, but these days it is limited to just a day.

Food and food items are an important part of all celebrations of the Syrian Christians. For the sake of avoiding redundancy, not all celebrations are discussed here, but they feature in the next chapter, where the food culture of the Syrian Christians is discussed in detail. The aim of this chapter is to establish that the Syrian Christian identity is formed from a myriad of influences, including the local and traditional practices, trade relations, colonialism, and religious influence of the Eastern Churches.

Chapter 3

Representation of Syrian Christian Identity through Food

3.1 Food, Culture and Identity

Food is an essential part of our life. It is a means of sustenance and helps us grow in a balanced way. It is a source of nutrition and energy, without which we cannot live. Kitler *et al.* define food as “any substance that provides nutrients necessary to maintain life and growth when ingested” (1). But food is more than just a means of sustenance for man. Food is something that we identify ourselves with. Daily fares are times for families to gather and spend time together, creating shared bonds and memories. Food enhances festivals. In fact, many festivals and rituals are dearer to us due to the variety of foods they offer; and many of these festivals and ceremonies are identified with certain foods. For example, the ritual of the Holy Communion in Christianity is associated with bread and wine, while Christmas brings to mind, for someone in Kerala, cake and wine or savouries like *kozhallappam* and *achappam*. Food creates a space for conversation and exchange.

As man moved from gathering food to agriculture, civilisations were built depending on the availability of food and the fertility of the land, and the type of food one grew or ate became part of one's identity or culture. Though food gathering did involve its own knowledge systems and hence culture, agriculture and cooking made the simple act of consuming food more complicated. The regular availability of certain food items due to agriculture overcame the need for hand to mouth sustenance and facilitated the development of customs around these products of agriculture. Preparing and cooking these products -artificially creating food that does not exist in nature – gave rise to more customs around food and brought it further into the ambit of culture.

In the journey from feeding to eating, food, along with its processes of production, preparation, and consumption, acquired meanings. Rules were made regarding what could be eaten and how it could be eaten, and these rules systematised food. Food was no longer just a means of nutrition but a symbol that had its own meanings and interpretations, defined by the society in which it was formed. Eating became a "behavior that develops beyond its own ends, replacing, summing up and signalling other behaviors" like "activity, work, sports, effort, leisure, [and] celebration" (Barthes 28). It became what distinguishes humans from animals who only feed. Since food is such an essential part of our lives, it is imperative that while studying food, one should look at the social and cultural aspects of it along with the nutritional ones. Sociologists and anthropologists have for long been interested in it. But recently, linguists too have been interested in the language of food or to use the term coined by Annie Huck-Lawson, the "food-voice".

The Encyclopedia Britannica defines cuisine as "the foods and methods of preparation traditional to a region or population". Hence, cuisine can be compared to language and the food items to its constituent elements. The cuisine of a particular community is shaped by factors like ecology, economic conditions, and culture. Ecology determines the raw materials that are available and the fuel used for food preparation, while economic conditions relate to trade and other practices of a community. The cultural determinant includes the previous two factors (as both ecology and economic conditions shape culture and is in turn shaped by culture) as well as other factors like the religious and sumptuary laws.

According to Theodore C. Bestor and Victoria Lyon Bestor:

Cuisine is a product of cultural imagination and is thought to include a range of practices and preferences shared broadly across the members of a society as they

prepare and partake in the food. This culinary imagination reflects, therefore, a loose agreement on a common and sustained template of cuisine as something definable and distinctive, something with more-or-less known qualities and boundaries (13).

Within this "loose agreement" and "common and sustained template" of cuisine, individual preferences also come into play, which communicates an individual's personal identity. According to Anna Meigs, "Food as object and eating as act resonate with attitudes and emotions related to the individual's understandings and feelings about self and other and the relationship between" (352). Hence, cuisine as a system of signification has its own langue and parole.

Identity is defined in many ways. It can be defined as a "property of the individual or as something that emerges through social interaction; it can be regarded as residing in the mind or in concrete social behaviour; it can be anchored to the individual or to the group" (Fina 265). But in the last twenty years or so, academicians have criticised the argument of the presence of individual self-identity that is free from one's social world and has argued that identity is a social construction (Fina 265). Hence, a person's identity is formed by what is accepted by the community to which he or she belongs or the culture of the particular community, and food is central to this sense of identity. There is a popular belief that "We Become What We Eat". It is believed that when a person eats, they incorporate properties of what they eat and what is incorporated in turn becomes the foundation for their identity. These beliefs and representations about food that attributes certain characteristics to them are not standalone but defined by shared maps of meaning or culture. For example, in the Indian ethos, the regular consumption of *rajasik* food was believed to make its consumer passionate and agitated. The *tamasik* food was thought to make people coarse, noisy,

and intolerant, while the *satvik* food or fresh food cooked with the least amount of spices was supposed to make its consumer calm and harmonious.

What a person chooses to eat incorporates the person into a group's culinary system – unless the person is expressly excluded and is not invited to share the table (being excommunicated, for example) – and defines the person's collective identity. According to Claude Fischler, "The way any given human group eats helps it assert its diversity, hierarchy and organisation, but also, at the same time, both its oneness and the otherness of whoever eats differently" (275). Thus, the food choices of an individual symbolise how she defines herself in terms of religion, ethnicity, social class and so on; and "what one eats defines who one is, culturally speaking, and conversely, who one is not." (Kitler *et al.* 4). In the words of Jean Jacques *et al.*, "food becomes a central identity marker, defining personality, social class, lifestyles, gender roles and relationships, from family, to community, to ethnic groups or nationality, changing through time and place" (1). Within a community or a group, food acts as a vehicle for expressing "the values, beliefs, attitudes and practices accepted by members of [the] group or community" - the culture of the community (Kitler *et al.* 6). Culture is not something one inherits but is learned through language acquisition and socialisation. The shared cuisine enables an individual to participate in a community's collective life. A community's identity is defined through the common interests and shared experiences of those belonging to the community (Zhang *et al.*) – including food.

The process of defining identity through food is not something that happens just internally within a community. A group's identity is also defined by what people who are not members of the group interpret from their food practices (Kitler *et al.* 4). The food practices of a community represent the shared values of that community and people outside the community interpret them according to their knowledge systems. Fischler opines that "[w]ithin the same culture a group often

defines the neighbouring group as “...-eaters” (279). In the Kerala culture, as the Syrian Christians consume pork, which is *haram* to the Muslims of Kerala, they would consider the Syrian Christians to be lacking in '*Imaan*', and the latter would be called as pork eaters by them.

Also, members outside of a community can recognise a person's communal identity if they have the knowledge about the different parameters of their cuisine or what is thought to be their food practices. These parameters include what is considered authentic, relationships surrounding food, beliefs surrounding food, ways of food consumption, the etiquette of eating etc. An obvious example of this would be how Syrian Christians could be identified by others at a community feast by their practice of folding the edge of the plantain leaf on which they will have their food. Thus, we can conclude that food is a marker of identity.

3.2 Food, Identity, Language and Translation

According to Stuart Hall, “[a]ny sound, word, image or object which functions as a sign, and is organised with other signs into a system which is capable of carrying and expressing meaning is ... ‘a language’” (19). Roland Barthes identifies food as an institution that implicitly points to “a set of images, dreams, tastes, choices and values” (23). According to him, when someone buys, serves or consumes food, these acts provide information, and it signifies (24). Also, like language, “the cuisine of a society may be analysed into constituent elements, which ... we might call “gustemes,” and which may be organised according to certain structures of opposition and correlation” (Strauss 86). Hence, food is a language or a system of communication; and, the ingredients used, the method of preparation, the food habits all become part of “a system of differences in signification”, enabling the communication through food (Barthes 25).

Barthes opines that when food signifies it refers to (among other things) a national past, an anthropological situation, and a nutritional or health consciousness. Food permits one to participate in a national past or a communal past and has a historical quality. The everyday consumption of food brings this past to the present and helps one assert one's identity that has been formed through the ages. The food habits of a community are also defined by the cultural connotations associated with certain foods. Feelings of inferiority are attached to certain foods to make members of a community abstain from them. There are also certain health values associated with certain foods that are more conditioned by society than based on actual nutrition. Thus, when food transmits a situation, it expresses culture and represents it.

In "The Work of Representation ", Stuart Hall opines that language operates as a representational system. For him, "[r]epresentation means using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent the world meaningfully, to other people" (15). That is, "representation is the production of meaning through language" (16). This production of meaning involves two systems of representation – the mental representations of things and language. Communication is possible because people belonging to the same culture share broadly the same conceptual maps, and through this, they construct their social world. A shared language helps represent or exchange meanings that are created through these shared conceptual maps and concepts and enable us to translate our thoughts into signs that can be used to communicate with others.

Barthes identifies two levels of signification, the level of denotation and connotation. When a food item signifies, at the level of denotation, it refers to our mental concept of the food item. At the level of connotation, it refers to our ideas associated with the food item, which is in turn shaped by culture and ideology. An obvious example would be beef. At the level of denotation, it

would represent our mental concept of what beef is, the cooked meat of cow or buffalo, its taste, colour etc. At the level of connotation, it represents impurity. The concept of impurity is associated with beef through the dominant ideology generally created by the upper-caste Hindus of the country. Hence, when a person consumes beef, he is seen as being impure.

Along with the different messages it encodes, food also communicates one's identity. Claude Fischler, in 1988 argues that "[a] human group's cuisine can ... be understood as a body of practices, representations, rules and norms based on classification" (278). A particular community defines its cuisine through shared representations of what is accepted and what is not within the community. These shared social representations help members of a community feel that they have "a common identity by having a common worldview" (Moscovici and Hewstone qtd. in Reddy and Dam 2). The maintenance of these shared representations or food practices help one be part of a community. At the same time, a community's identity is also defined by what others who are not part of the community think about them. When food represents a community's identity, people who are not part of the community interpret their food practices based on their own knowledge systems and beliefs. As mentioned above, when a community consumes beef as part of their culinary system, people belonging to other communities who share the belief that the consumption of beef is sinful would view them as sinful or impure.

A person is introduced to the cuisine of his cultural group in his childhood through a set of classifications, and Fischler identifies four levels of classifications. The first level of classification divides the universe into what is food and what is not. In his *Food is Culture*, Massimo Montanari argues that Taste is a product of culture. For him, "[t]he organ of taste is not the tongue, but the brain, a culturally (and therefore historically) determined organ through which are transmitted and learned the criteria for evaluations" (61). According to Levi Strauss, food

“must not only be good to eat but also good to think” (qtd. in Fischler 281). Hence, what is edible and what is not is determined by culture, which conditions our taste.

The second level of classification is religious. This is the level at which food taboos operate. The maintenance of food taboos is one of the most basic elements of identity as it defines the self and the ‘other’ quite definitely. Fischler notes that the application of Kashrut has been one of the cohesive factors in Judaism over the millennia (279).

Food is also classified in cuisine by the rules of propriety and context. All foods are not appropriate for all occasions and everywhere. There are rules, though they might be unspoken, that define what should be served for breakfast and what for dinner. What is considered suitable for children might not be considered so for adults even though there are no health considerations and the consumption of these foods by adults might be looked down upon in that particular culture.

The last level of classification would be in terms of health or nutritional practices. Some foods are considered to complement each other while some are not. For example, in Kerala cuisine, consuming buttermilk and fish curry in the same meal is forbidden because they are believed to be incompatible foods which, when consumed together, can harm digestive health. But it has to be noted that even these nutritional rules go beyond the body and into the realm of culture (Barthes 27). Thus, food aids in the construction of one’s identity and is a marker of that identity.

When food represents the identity of a community, it translates the shared conceptual maps or culture and the identity of the community into a sign which can communicate that identity. The translation that happens here is intersemiotic, from our thoughts or mental representations into the language of cuisine. For example, the plum cake made by the Syrian Christians signifies - at the level of connotation - Christmas for the Syrian Christians. The plum cake hence represents the

religious identity of the Syrian Christians to others, which they then interpret based on their own knowledge systems. The difference in the ingredients used, especially the spices like cardamom and cinnamon, which is experienced through the difference in taste, would provide further clues to their identity, as Indians or as Keralites. Hence, when the Syrian Christian cuisine represents the community's identity, a translation takes place.

While pointing out the reasons for the 'translator's invisibility', Lawrence Venuti describes how due to the "individualistic conception of authorship" in the Anglo-American culture, translation is considered as a "second order representation" of the author's thoughts and feelings which is represented in the original. That is, translations are considered representations of the original text (6-7). The *OED* defines identity as "Who or what a person or thing is; a distinct impression of a single person or thing presented to or perceived by others; a set of characteristics or a description that distinguishes a person or thing from others" (emphasis added) ("identity" 2b). Though it is personal identity that is being defined here, when we consider a community as a single unit, this definition becomes applicable to it too. Hence, identity can be considered as a representation of the characteristics that define a community. When food represents this identity to others, it becomes a "second order representation" or a translation of that identity.

Bogusia Temple opines that "translation is an act that creates a world that is presented from the author's position within it", a representation of the author's/ translator's world view. Hence, when the Syrian Christian identity is represented through their cuisine, what is being represented is not an already present and fixed entity but a representation of the collective imagination of the community, which is shaped by and shapes discourses about the community and their social interactions.

Hence, the Syrian Christian cuisine as a signifying system "stands for" or "represents" the community's concepts, ideas or feelings about who they are or their identity. It enables them to create and share a collective identity and also enables them to communicate their identity to people outside the community. This is possible because when the Syrian Christian cuisine represents the identity of the community, a translation of their conception of themselves - their identity - takes place into the language of cuisine, which is then 'read' and interpreted by others enabling them to decode the community's identity.

According to Giuliana Garzone, "the preservation of eating habits and culinary traditions is a very important and effective anthropological tool available to those who feel their identity is threatened in its very existence because of power asymmetry ... or because of integration and assimilation" (217). Hence, marginalised and minority groups tend to preserve their food habits in order to assert their identity or to maintain tradition and distinctiveness. But apart from expressing and preserving their distinctive identity, food also is used as an effective tool of communication of that identity.

According to Marc Charron and Renee Desjardins, "Food not only shapes identities, but it can also act as a pivot or bridge language between divergent identities, a form of cultural mediation or translation"(1). Kerala's cuisine is a case in point. Though the different religious communities of Kerala do consider certain food items as authentically theirs, it is quite challenging to delineate food that purely belongs to *Mappillah*, Hindu, or Christian cuisine. Many dishes, though they originated from or belonged to a particular religious community, their transmission across communities has meant that they no longer remain exclusive to the particular community. The people of Kerala across religions have coopted biryani, which was part of the *Mappillah* cuisine, into their cuisine. Many Christian families in Kerala now cook biryani as a special dish for

Christmas at their homes. Snack items like *Kuzhalappam* or *Achappam* also no longer remain exclusively Syrian Christian.

Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, in his *Near a Thousand Tables*, notes that "[t]here is no more intriguing problem in the history of food than that of how cultural barriers to the transmission of food and foodways have been traversed or broken" (5). In the Indian scenario, Arjun Appadurai observes that the exchange of recipes is the first stage of "carefully controlled interethnic dining" (7). He argues that:

In a society where dining across caste or ethnic boundaries is still a relatively delicate matter, recipes sometimes move where people may not ... In many cases, the movement of recipes across caste, language, and ethnic boundaries is accompanied by an increase in formal (and informal) entertaining and dining across these boundaries (ibid).

Thus, as a system of communication, food acts as a bridge or mediator between different communities and communicates or translates the identity of the marginalised or minority groups to those outside of the community, which they then interpret. Hence, food and practices related to food should be treated as a translation.

3.3 The Syrian Christian Cuisine

As mentioned in the first chapter, the cuisine of Kerala is highly influenced by its trade and colonial relations. The Portuguese were the primary influencers among the colonisers, while China left the most lasting impression through trade relations. Utensils like *cheenachatti* or Chinese woks

are used in Kerala to this date, and so are *bharanis*, which were porcelain jars that were used by the Chinese to export honey and import spices like pepper.

The Portuguese brought with them potatoes, tapioca, chillies, red chilli pepper, tomato, cashew, guava, papaya, pineapple, custard apple, and mosambi, some from their own country and some from South America and Africa. They also improved the cultivation of ginger, pepper, cardamom and cinnamon in Kerala. Though vinegar was produced before in Kerala, it was introduced as a cooking ingredient by the Portuguese and became a prime influencer in Kerala cuisine, especially in the south and central Kerala, where the majority of the Christian population lived. Yeast, which is now used by the Syrian Christians to make *appam* and other leavened breads was also introduced by the Portuguese.

The principal foods of the Syrian Christians are boiled rice and curries made of vegetables and/or meat. They had no prejudices against any particular kind of food (Mateer 218). Fish is a staple food due to proximity to the sea and an abundance of rivers. They were mostly vegetarians though there were no particular prohibitions regarding any food. Rev. Samuel Mateer observes that beef was not readily available and hence was not consumed by the Syrian Christians. In the early 20th century, anthropologist L.K. Ananthakrishna Ayyar observes in his *Anthropology of Syrian Christians* that the community used to consume “flesh of sheeps, fowls, deers, pigs, porcupines, cows, and snipe” and that pigs were reared at their houses for this purpose (239).

Diary and eggs were allowed even on days of fasts, except on Good Friday, but they abstained from meat on all Wednesdays, Fridays, Lent, Holy Saturday, and vigil of Christmas. Today, we can hardly see these dietary rules being followed except during Lent and some major fasts like *irupathunombu*, *moonnunombu*, *ettunomb* etc. On Sundays, having non-vegetarian dishes is

the norm and the meals include dishes of beef, chicken, or pork depending on the preference of families.

Of the many things that food and the practices surrounding it signify, power relations within a community is one. Sharing a table has been for a long time a symbol of shared friendships or relationships, of being part of a community, of acceptance and respect. We do not tend to share tables with people whom we do not accept as one of us, with people whom we do not consider worthy or equal to us. But being part of the table, being accepted does not mean that the relationships are equal. In fact, the table is where hierarchies can be established the best. We only need to take the example of how during meals, the men are seated at the table while the women stand by to serve them and eat after the men have finished eating. Even among those seated, hierarchies are maintained by the place assigned to an individual, the head of the family or the host, or the most influential person taking the seat at the head of the table while the rest are assigned seats away from his, the distance inversely proportional to the position of the person in the group. In his book *Food is Culture*, Massimo Montanari talks about the relationships at a table. He argues that the place accorded to a guest at the table signifies the hierarchical position or importance of the individual. According to him, the rectangular table is the most adept at expressing these distances and hierarchies, while the round table appears to be more "democratic" (96). The power relations within a community also manifest themselves in practices of serving food. For example, generally, in an Indian household, the women of the house first serve the head of the family and only then do they serve the rest. Hence, even at the table where all who are welcomed are accepted as part of the group or community, everything is not equal and harmonious.

The seating arrangements at the table, especially at feasts and ritualistic meals of the Syrian Christians of Kerala, can give insight into the power relations within the community. The Syrian Christians follow a patriarchal system of family. According to Dr. Francis Eluvathingal:

St. Thomas Christians having followed the patriarchal system of the family, enjoyed the system of having a male person as the head of the family ...

The father was the head of the family. If the grandfather was present, then he was the head. If both the father and the grandfather were absent, then the eldest son who has reached the age of maturity was considered to be the head of the family ...

Being head of the family was related to the juridical status as well as social status.

The chair of the head of the family was considered to be the seat of authority and generally no elders occupied that chair of the head ... The house of the parents would be inherited by the youngest son in the family, and other sons would get fair portions of land or other properties ... parents lived in their ancestral house, and they were to be taken care of by the married youngest son till their death.

(Eluvathingal 3-4).

In Syrian Christian families, the head of the family and other male members sit and eat first, followed by the male children of the family. A hierarchy of age is also followed in the practice of serving, and the eldest member is always accorded more respect. The women and the girl children in the family usually eat after their morning chores are done and mostly together in the kitchens unless their children have to leave for school. Nowadays, this segregation at the table is not strictly followed, especially during informal and family meals, and all family members sit together and eat unless hindered by schedules of daily life. But the remnants can be observed even now when guests arrive at the homes, and there is not enough space at the table for all. In such cases, the

menfolk and the elderly eat first, and if there is still space left, then the children and female guests occupy the space. The hostess and the female members of the host family eat the leftover food at last.

The hierarchy at the table can be more definitely observed at feasts and ritualistic dinners. On the day of Passover, during the ritual of breaking bread or having the *pesaha meal*, the father breaks the *pesaha appam* and shares it among the family members, first giving it to his eldest son and then the rest in descending order of age. In 1883, Rev. Samuel Mateer observed in his *Native Life in Travancore* that, at the marriage feasts of the Syrian Christians, the guests are seated in parallel rows to each other.

All the men are seated on mats by themselves, and are served first. The women are seated inside. The men take rank according to seniority and antiquity of their pedigree. The position of greatest honor is marked by two pieces of cloth, one black, the other of some dark colour, put in a place visible from all parts of the pandal. If an upstart, or a convert from Hinduism, however wealthy, takes his seat on these, irony is poured on him by the younger men till he is glad to vacate the seat (Mateer 221).

In present days the men and women eat together on the tables, but tables are reserved for the clergy on which the senior or respected members of the family also are seated. The bride and the groom eat at last along with the close family members, after all the guests are fed.

Hence, we can see that the relationships at the table bring out the patriarchal system and age hierarchies followed in Syrian Christian families, which are in accordance with the teachings of the Bible (Ephesians 5:22-24).

The Syrian Christians have various dishes that are part of their daily food and also several savouries and snacks. There are also some food items that are prepared especially for certain festivals and are part of various religious rituals. In this dissertation, an analysis of sixteen food items which are part of the Syrian Christian cuisine, including everyday foods, snacks and delicacies, festival foods its ingredients, processes and practices surrounding its preparation, and rituals and taboos relating to its consumption is done to find out how the Syrian Christian the identity is revealed through their cuisine. Apart from this, the consumption of alcohol by the community is also looked at as the community is the highest consumer of alcohol in Kerala and alcohol consumption has become a part of the community's identity. In the dissertation, food is considered as a translation by employing Charron and Desjardin's idea of food as a bridge language that mediates between different cultures (as shown earlier in the chapter). Also, the representation of the Syrian Christian identity by food is also considered as a translation as food communicates the identity of the community to others. Hence it is argued that when the Syrian Christian food represents the community's identity, a translation takes place.

3.3.1 Everyday Foods

The everyday food of a community and what they consider as staples shapes and are shaped by nature and culture. Though they might seem to be of little consequence, everyday foods offer insights into “cultural norms, traditions, easily accessible ingredients, and the influence of seasonality” (Greta G. *et al.*). These insights are not neutral images but the product of discourses about and by the community that are already present and which are made and re-made continuously.

In her cookbook *The Suriani Kitchen*, Latika George describes the menu on an ordinary day of a Syrian Christian. Though the extent of the spread described differs according to the difference in classes and is not to be frequently found today in modern nuclear families where the men and the women work outside the house, add or subtract a few items, it is an accurate description of daily fare for an upper-class traditional Syrian Christian household. According to Latika George:

A day in a traditional Syrian Christian home starts with a steaming glass of black coffee sweetened with *sarkara* (raw cane sugar). Several glasses later, breakfast may consist of *puttu* (steamed rice cakes) served with *kadala karri* (spicy curried chickpeas). Also on the table would be a platter of *erachiolathiyathu* (fried beef) and *meen vevichathu* (fish curry cooked in a clay pot), both leftovers from the previous day. Steamed plantain halves in their skins are served hot, and a bowl of fresh grated coconut is served on the side with *paani* (sweet palm syrup). Breakfast is rounded out with a plate of *poovan* bananas and more coffee, this time frothy with a liberal dose of milk (5).

After breakfast, a mid-morning snack of *kanji* (rice gruel) or *kappa* (boiled tapioca) and *chammanthi* (Chutney) is served and is accompanied by a glass of *moru* (spiced cooked buttermilk) or tender coconut water.

Lunch includes “boiled red country rice, *erachiolathiyathu* [beef fry], *meen vevichathu* [fish curry], crisp fried fish, *thorans* (side dishes) of different vegetables and, again spiced buttermilk. Pickles and chutney are also served. The meal ends with fresh fruit, yogurt and *paani*”. Later, “tea of coffee is served at around 5 p.m. with *palaharams* [snacks] from the storeroom and hot fried *ethakkaappams* (plantain fritters) or *kozhukotta* (stuffed rice cakes)”. Dinner, for the

Syrian Christians is usually light. *Kanji* and *cherupayar* (mung beans) along with *chammanthi*, *achar*, and *pappadam* (flatbreads made from lentil flour) is what is usually on the menu, along with leftovers from lunch or an omelette (George 5).

It can be seen from the above discussion that rice is the staple grain of the community, as is for the majority of the people in Kerala. Coconut occupies the next important position in the cuisine. It is present in almost all the dishes described above in some form or the other. It is no wonder as Kerala is known for its coconut trees and is even believed to be named after this common but important and precious tree.

3.3.1.1 Appam (String hoppers)

Appam is a dish that is made for breakfast. It is usually made on weekends or holidays because its cooking time is more than the dishes like *puttu*. *Appam* is a kind of pancake made from a fermented batter of rice and coconut milk. It is one of the identifying dishes of the Syrian Christians, though the dish is not exclusive to them and is found around the world. Much is not known about the origin of the dish and there are several speculations about it. According to Indian food historian K.T. Achaya, *Perumpanuru*, an ancient Tamil poem composed in the 2nd century, mentions *appam*, indicating Tamil roots. American food writer Gil Marks opines differently in his *Encyclopedia of Jewish Foods* which explores how Jewish recipes were altered as the Jews migrated from their home countries. According to him, *appam* has been a staple among the migrant Jewish communities of Kochi, Mumbai, and Kolkata, pointing to Jewish Indian origins. In fact, *appam* is most associated with the Cochin Jews of Kerala, and according to Dr. Essie Sassoon, the technique of fermentation of *appam* using toddy originated in Kerala's Jew Town. But this

dish has been popularised by the Syrian Christians, and the origin of the word *appam* can be traced to the Syriac word *Apya* (Abraham 31).

According to Barthes, food as a signifier refers to three themes: a commemorative function, an anthropological situation, and a health consciousness. He argues that food permits the consumer to partake in a national past, or here, a communal past. Traditionally, *appam* was fermented with kallu (toddy) and was called *kallappam*. When the Portuguese came to Kerala, they introduced yeast to Kerala. As the Syrian Christians prepare and consume *appam*, they are also taking part in their community's past that is influenced by the Syriac language, the close trade and religious relations with the indigenous Jews, and the Portuguese colonialism and Catholicism. It also shows how food has mediated between the different communities, influencing both the source and the target cultures.

3.3.1.2. *Ishtu* (Stew)

Appam is usually paired with a Stew of either vegetable or meat made from a base of coconut milk. Though meat is usually preferred by the community. The meat and vegetables are cooked in coconut milk and spiced with pepper, cardamom, cinnamon, and curry leaves, nativising the British brown stew which is made in a base of broth and tomato paste along with sauces and condiments. The Brown stew is thickened using cornflour, but in the Kerala stew, the thickness is determined by the thickness of the coconut milk. The spices used in the British Brown stew are paprika, onions and garlic. This dish could have been the result of the creative experimentation of the *Kokis* (cooks trained by the English) who made English dishes adapted to the Indian palate and were often employed by influential households, Syrian Christians among them.

Like language, food items too has a paradigmatic relationship with other food items. When one ingredient is substituted for another, for example, coconut milk for broth, the meanings associated with the food change, the identity being represented changes. In the Syrian Christian cuisine, the stew represents a community that has held on strongly to its native Kerala identity or palate, even though the ingredients needed for the British stew was available to them, but at the same time has been welcoming and adapting to other cultures. As the stew mediated between the colonial British culture and the native Kerala culture, the Syrian Christians domesticised the translation to make it acceptable to their palate.

3.3.1.3. *Erachiolathiyathu* (Beef Fry)

Erachiolathiyathu is an important item of Syrian Christian cuisine. According to A. Sreedhara Menon, most Christians during the 16th and 17th centuries were vegetarians and “beef eating had not come into vogue” (223). But by the late 19th century, the scenario had changed and Rev. Samuel Mateer in his book *Native Life in Travancore* published in 1883, observes that the Syrian Christians have “no prejudices against any particular kind of food” (160). He also mentions that the reason why beef is not eaten is difficulty in procurement and not any taboo. The Nair community (“Malayalam Sudras”) who had a caste position similar to that of the Syrian Christians in Kerala, did not eat beef although they had no prohibition on mutton, poultry etc. (Mateer 112). Syrian Christians were very similar to the Nair community and many of their rituals and practices were borrowed from them. Hence, the absence of the taboo on the consumption of beef is quite noteworthy and does show the influence of the Portuguese and Dutch who had colonised Kerala from the 16th century and had constant interactions with this community culturally and religiously.

In Kerala too, the upper-caste Hindu groups like the Namboodiri Brahmins forbid the eating of meat, especially cow meat, due to similar ideas of purity and as the cow is a sacred animal for them (Osella and Filippo 178). A certain feeling of inferiority is associated with it by them. Beef is considered impure, and its consumption is believed to cause the loss of 'shuddhi'. However, the Christians in Kerala readily consume beef and it is consumed at least once a week in most of their households even though it is expensive, distinguishing them from these other religious communities (Abraham 2020). Thus, it is acceptable to say that these communities view the Christians in Kerala as inferior or without 'shuddhi' because of their practice of consumption and are represented as 'beef eaters'. Though it leads to stereotypes, the consumption of beef has become a mark of identity of the Christians; that is, a representation of their identity.

3.3.1.4. *Meen Vevichathu or Meen Curry (Fish Curry)*

Due to their geographical closeness to the sea and the abundance of rivers in the state, fish is a staple among the people of Kerala. Both sea and freshwater fishes are cooked. The *mathi* or sardines is the most commonly used fish and was used by all classes due to it being highly nutritious and cheap. But nowadays, it has become quite expensive and not affordable to all. Other commonly used fishes include *aavoli* (black pomphret), *natholi* (anchovies), *ayala* (Indian Mackerel), *choora* (Tuna Mackerel), *Neymeen* (seer fish) etc., of which *neymeen* is quite expensive and is sought after because it has fewer fish bones and is quite tasty. Usually, only the upper and upper-middle classes consume *Neymeen* and its varieties daily. *Neymeen* and other fleshy fishes are usually served for special occasions and for weddings. Fish is served mainly as curries, fries, *peera* (fish with shredded coconut), and as a pickle. Along with this preparations like *fish moilee* and *meen pollichathu* (fish roasted in banana leaves) are also served during special occasions or

when guests come. *Meen Piralan* (Fish Roast) is also a popular preparation among the Syrian Christians and has now become popular among the other communities in Kerala too. Small fishes like prawns, anchovies etc. are also dried and stored to be made into fries, chutneys (*unakka meen chammanthi*) or fish powder (*meen podi*).

Fish curry is prepared in a variety of ways in different parts of Kerala. The type of fish used or favoured also differs according to the region depending on geographical and historical factors. In Kottayam, and other parts of *Madhya Thiruvitamkoor*, freshwater fish is readily available and hence fishes like *Karimeen* is very famous in Alleppy, Thiruvalla and such other parts of Kerala. In Thrissur too river fishes are cooked. In Fort Kochi of Ernakulam and other coastal areas, sea fishes are more preferred mainly due to their availability. Though the fishes are a staple, the method of cooking differs according to the region.

The *Kudampuli itta meen curry* (fish curry in which kokum rind is used as souring agent) is common in Kottayam and other parts of *Madhya Thiruvitamkoor* (mid-Travancore). This fish curry preparation is red in colour and is very spicy as it has added chillies in them (Achaya 124). Apart from being served with rice, this red, fish curry is served as a side to the *kappa vevichathu* and is quite readily available in toddy shops. It is to be noted that demographically, the central part of Kerala has the highest concentration of Christians. Kottayam has the highest proportion of Christians among its population (45.8%), followed by Idukki (42.2), Pathanamthitta (40.3), Ernakulam (37.8), and Thrissur (24.5). Among these, Pathanamthitta is considered to be the major Christian centre (Zachariah 16-18). Hence, it can be deduced that the *kudampuli itta meen curry* is a Syrian Christian preparation that became popular in central Kerala. Also, K.T. Achaya in his *Indian Food Tradition: A Historical Companion*, identifies this dish as belonging to

the Syrian Christians of Kottayam. The use of the dish is quite representative of the Syrian Christian's affinity for spicy food.

In Thrissur, the fish curry is based in coconut milk and tender mango is used as the souring agent (Achaya 124). The *Thiyya* community which used to be engaged in the toddy tapping profession earlier also has a similar preparation of fish curry, where fish is cooked in coconut sauce to which small pieces of mango are added. The Latin Christians too cook similar fish curry, but there are variations from the Syrian Christian style of cooking. The Latin Christians add coriander powder and add shallots instead of onion.

Hence, the *Kudampuli itta meen curry* is a typical dish of the Syrian Christians and represents their love for spices, as can be observed from comparing the variations in dishes like *meen pollichatu* (fish roasted in banana leaves) and *pork roast* among the Syrian Christian community and the Latin or Anglo-Indian community of Kerala. Class differences can be observed through the fish used to make the *meen curry* and also through the quantity of fish used in the curry. Also, though fresh food is preferred always by the community, *meen curry* becomes tastier as the days pass as the fish absorbs the flavours of the curry and the juices of the fish get mixed with the curry as it sits.

3.3.1.5. Meen Pollichatu (Fish roasted in banana leaves)

Meen Pollichatu is another variety of fish preparation. Though the technique can be used to prepare any whole fish, this style of preparation is mainly used to prepare *karimeen* (pearl spot), the state fish of Kerala. The Syrian Christians prepare this dish spiced using red chillies and vinegar and tomato is used to moisten the *arappu* (spice paste). The Latin Catholics, whose cuisine has a larger Portuguese influence in terms of spice usage and manner of cooking, prepare this dish by

using coconut milk instead of vinegar as the base of the *arappu* and is spiced with pepper instead of red chillies. The Anglo-Indians² make use of *kodampulli* and dry red chillies in their recipe for this dish. Hence, the difference in ingredients used in making this dish marks the identity of these different Christian communities. That is, the “message” that is encoded in the language of food changes as “elements” are substituted paradigmatically.

3.3.1.6. Meen Molee (Fish Moilee)

Fish Molee is a fish curry made in coconut milk and is mildly spiced using only green chillies. It is a kind of fish stew and is different from other fish curry preparations popular in Kerala. Apart from Kerala, the dish is also popular in Singapore and Malaysia (Varghese). Though the origin of this dish is contested, it is believed to be a Syrian Christian dish. There are many stories about the origin of this dish. Researcher and Chef Soju Philips believe that fish molee is of Jewish and Anglo-Indian influences and that those living in the regions of Kuttanad and nearby places borrowed it from them. But veteran chef Rasheed Abdul Khader has a different opinion. He believes that the dish is named after the person who first cooked it – a woman named Molly (“How Did Mappas Land in X'mas Menu”). Another story that connects to Rasheed's story is how as the Portuguese found the Kerala fish curry too spicy for them, a Kerala woman named Molly added coconut milk to reduce the spice and served it to them (Varghese). The Portuguese too have a fish stew called *caldeirada* that is similar to fish molee but is made from a broth of saffron and tomatoes instead of coconut milk and also contains potatoes. According to Latika George, the travellers from Malaya have influenced the dish (90). According to the website of the department of tourism, Kerala, *fish moilee* became popular through the feasts held by the seminaries set up by the Portuguese. Through these feasts, the recipes which were kept guarded by the foreign cooks of

the seminaries became popular, and many natives tried to recreate the dish and many cooks doubled up as chefs for the Christians (“Christian Cuisine”). Hence, *fish moilee* could be called a local variation of *caldeirada* or the Portuguese fish stew.

Whatever the origin be, today it is undoubtedly identified as an authentic Syrian Christian dish and is served by them for weddings and for festivals. The mild spice of the dish is in contrast to the general cuisine of the Syrian Christians and does point to foreign influences. The Latin Catholics use coriander powder as an ingredient in preparing this dish while the Syrian Christians desist from it. As the origin is not clear, it is difficult to say whether the community has domesticised a foreign dish by using local ingredients or whether they have reinvented their dish for the foreign palate.

3.3.1.7. *Kappa Vevichathu and Kappa Puzhuniyathu* (Mashed and Seasoned Tapioca and Steamed Tapioca)

Kappa or tapioca is extracted from the cassava plant, a species native to Brazil. It was majorly considered as a labourer’s food, a mid-morning meal given to them after their toil in the morning (“From Staple to Delicacy, Tapioca Comes of Age in Kerala”). It was brought to Kerala by the Portuguese in the 17th century and is a product of the Columbian Exchange. The Portuguese found this tuber with high caloric value useful to feed the slaves while they were transported across the colonies. Today, India is one of the largest producers of Tapioca, with the states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu accounting for most of the country's production (Manuel), though in Kerala, high daily wages and severe rodent attacks have made tapioca farming no longer profitable (“From Staple to Delicacy”).

Though the Portuguese had brought *kappa* to Kerala, it became popular as a food in the 1880s when the then king of Travancore, Vishakham Thirunna Rama Varma who was also a botanist popularised this food after a severe famine struck the state, in order to ensure that it did not happen again. As tapioca could be poisonous if not cooked properly, to encourage it as a food item, Vishakham Thirunna had to eat tapioca publicly to ensure his subjects that it was safe to eat (Nagarajan). The king also encouraged people to start planting tapioca in their backyards and planted them in lands owned by the royals and a sign was put up prohibiting anyone from taking cuttings of the plant as it was exotic and tasty to eat once cooked (Nagarajan). This use of reverse psychology had the desired effect and tapioca was accepted by the people and became a staple of the labourers. It was a second famine that further popularised tapioca in Kerala. During World War II, the import of rice from Burma stopped and caused a shortage of rice in Kerala, especially in Travancore (Nagarajan). *Kappa*, being a crop that needs less water and maintenance was a solution to the problem.

During unexpected disruptions of usual food practices, such as the famine that happened in Kerala in the 1800s and during WWII, the need for survival forces changes in food practices. But these changes are made in such a way that it does not disrupt the basic food culture of the society or the familiar language (of food). The strategy used in such cases is that of substitution (Montanari 104). Massimo Montanari explains this phenomenon in linguistic terms. In scenarios of abrupt disruptions, the morphology of food is kept intact while the lexicons are substituted. The two famines that hit Kerala and are mentioned above caused a shortage of rice, the staple of Kerala. In that scenario, rice was substituted by tapioca. In this substitution, the morphology was kept intact as methods of cooking and serving the food (boiling and sautéing) remained unchanged and so did the basic diet of starch. But in tapioca's case, the substitution was so profound and systematic

that even when the extenuating circumstance was gone the variation (tapioca) remained within the food culture and became a natural part of the sign system.

Being a landowning class, the Syrian Christians of Kerala found this crop very useful. They could grow the crop in their lands and use it to feed the labourers who used to work for them. They also used to give it as remuneration for the labourers and these labourers used to dry them and store it for use during the rainy seasons as fresh and good tapioca would not be available then. According to Massimo Montanari, the lower classes prefer foods with starch as they are easily acquired and preserved and can fill the belly (72). As kappa is quite tasteless and can absorb flavour from its seasonings, it was perfect for the people of Kerala to experiment with. The food also spread among the upper classes too. This co-option by the upper-classes of a predominantly lower class or slave food like tapioca is due to the positive ideas they have created about the food item. As a community that prides itself on being hardworking, the working class food would have had a special allure to them and Kerala being a predominantly starch eating state made this co-option easier as they did not have to change their taste.

There are many dishes made from *kappa* in Kerala. *Kappa Varuthathu* (Tapioca chips), *Kappa biryani*, *Kappa vevichathu*, *kappa puzhungiyathu* are some of them. Out of these, the latter two are the most popular among the Syrian Christians, and Keralites in general. *Kappa Vevichathu* is tapioca cooked and then mashed and seasoned with coconut paste, turmeric, ginger, cumin seeds, green chillies, mustard seeds, shallots, curry leaves and red chillies. It is served with spicy *meen curry* (fish curry). It used to and continues to be a hot-selling item in toddy shops and tea stalls. *Kappa Puzhungiyathu* is tapioca simply boiled in water. It is seasoned only with salt. *Kappa Puzhungiyathu* is usually had with *Ulli Chammanthi* (Pearl Onion Chutney), a simple condiment made from pearl onion, green chillies, and salt which are coarsely ground. In

communities where strong social stratifications are absent, it is the quantity of food and elaboration of common staples that differentiates between the different strata. Hence, the seasoning of the food item using chillies, mustard seeds, coconut etc. in *Kappa Vevichathu* enhanced the common staple of *Kappa Puzhungiyathu*.

Being farm labourers' food, *kappa* was never accepted as part of the Kerala cuisine in hotels, though now it is served even in star hotels and is much in demand among the foreign tourists who come to Kerala ("From Staple to Delicacy"). *Kappa* is also used by the Kerala diaspora to hold on to their food culture and identity. As it is a root crop and stays for long and can be preserved for even longer by drying, it is transported by the Kerala diaspora in their place of stay.

3.3.2 Festival Foods

Festivals and feasts are very important to the Syrian Christians and the most important aspect of these feasts and festivals are family and community gatherings. Most festivals and feasts include customs and rituals that necessitate coming together as a family or community and sharing food. Christmas and Easter are the most important religious festivals of the Syrian Christians and Hosanna Sunday, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday are some of the important days which are celebrated. Apart from these, there are many feast days dedicated to different saints, of which the feast of Mother Mary or *Vanakkamasam* and of St Thomas are of foremost importance for them. Foods made for these festivals include Pesehaappam and paani, kaadi, kodalukuri, pork roast, neyyappam, kuzhalappam, and churuttu among others.

3.3.2.1 *Pesaha Appam and Pesaha Paal (The Pesaha Meal)*

On Maundy Thursday, which commemorates the final supper of Jesus Christ with his disciples, the Syrian Christians eat the *pesaha* meal. This practice is very unique to the Syrian Christians of Kerala and is not found in other Christians communities around the world (Alumakkal 58). Though some Latin Christian communities in Kerala do practice this ritual, its absence among the Latin communities that do not have close connections or do not live in regions populated by the Syrian Christians lets us infer that the former have borrowed the ritual from their Syrian Christian brethren.

It consists of unleavened bread made from a batter of ground rice flour, black gram, ground cumin seeds, grated coconut, garlic, and onion (*pesahaappam*) and a dip made from jaggery, cardamom, coconut milk and rice flour (*pesaha paal*). Unlike other *appams* made by the community, *pesaha appam* is the only one that is made from black gram. The *pesaha appam* is cooked by steaming and is marked with a cross made from palm leaf consecrated on Palm Sunday. As the *appam* is being cooked, it is stabbed multiple times, usually using the rear end of a spoon to prevent rising. This stabbing is also part of the Maundy Thursday ritual and is called “*joothante kannu kuthal*” or piercing the eyes of the Jew, a probable reference to Judas of Iscariot, the disciple who betrayed Jesus. After prayers, the family gathers together and the head of the family cuts the *appam* and shares it among the family members, first giving it to his eldest son and then the rest in descending order of age. The sharing of the bread shows the hierarchy of status in the Syrian Christian families, which is defined by both gender and age.

The practice of having the unleavened bread is borrowed from the Jewish communities of Kerala. The Jews have the *matzah* (unleavened bread) in memory of their deliverance from the

Egyptians or the Passover as described in the Torah. They have the unleavened bread for seven days after Passover and their unleavened bread does not have a palm leaf cross on them. The Jewish pesahaappam or *matzo* is made according to the kosher laws from wheat flour and water and is grilled till crisp. These differences in ingredients and method of preparation bring out the Syrian Christian identity as they believe in Jesus and do not follow kosher laws, unlike the Jews. It is the difference in what each community observes, and their historical origins that gives rise to the differences in the methods of preparation. The palm leaf cross signifies what the Syrian Christians are commemorating the last supper of Christ before his crucifixion, the Maundy Thursday, and not the Passover, the context and origin of both days being different.

3.3.2.2. *Chorukka* or *Kaippu Vellam* (Bitter Herb Drink)

Chorukka is a drink made from bitter gourd, vinegar, and some bitter herbs, drunk on Good Friday during church service in remembrance of Christ's passion. It is believed that Christ was given a bitter drink when he asked for water while carrying the cross. Having bitter herbs is also part of the Passover Seder of the Jews. The bitter herbs are called *maror* and are eaten to fulfil the biblical commandment to "eat the lamb together with the unleavened bread and bitter herbs" for Passover (*New International Version*, 2011, Numbers 9:11). As the Syrian Christians drink the *chorukka* on Good Friday and not on the first day of the Passover (on Maundy Thursday) there is a difference in the meaning associated with the drink from that of the Jewish *maror*. The difference in signification communicates the religious identity of the Syrian Christians.

3.3.2.3. *Pidiyum Kozhiyum* (Rice Dumplings and Chicken Curry)

Pidiyum Kozhiyum is a traditional Syrian Christian food. It is a dish that can be had for any meal and is a full meal. It is mainly made during *pethratha* and Christmas and also as a *nercha* called panthrandu *sleehanmarude nercha*. *Pidiyum Kozhiyum* is a combination of rice dumplings (*pidi*) and chicken curry (*kozhi* means chicken). This dish can be served by putting the rice dumplings in the chicken curry or they can be served separately. When served separately, coconut milk is added to both chicken and curry. When served together, steamed rice dumplings and coconut milk are added to the chicken curry which already has ground coconut mixed in it.

The dish supposedly has its origins in the 4th Century A.D. when Thomas of Knanayi and his group of Christians from Persia landed in Kerala's Muziris Port, they were welcomed by local chieftains with seventy-two rights. They were treated with *kozhukkatta* - a delicacy of Kerala – by the local people of the place, but as the guests were non-vegetarians, the chieftain asked the people to cook some meat dish for them. Though there are, of course, no written records to corroborate this origin story (much like most Syrian Christian dishes), it is well defined by oral histories, and even today grandmothers tell this tale. The circumstantial possibility of this origin story being true is high as *kozhukkatta* was already well known and eaten in many parts of India and also in Kerala before the 4th century.

Pidiyum Kozhiyum became an upper-caste privilege and exclusive to the higher classes as the ingredients used were not easily affordable to all. As the Christian community who came to Kerala under Knanaya Thomman migrated, they introduced the dish to central and northern Kerala and this dish became very popular in Central Travancore and Malabar regions of Kerala (“Traditional Flavours from Grandma’s Kitchen”). Hence, when the Syrian Christians consume

pidiyum kozhiyum they partake in the history of their community and keep alive their memory of their origin.

The Syro-Malabar Christians and Syrian Jacobite Christians - two groups under the Syrian Christians – prepare this food on the day of *Pethratha* (the day before starting of Lent or anpathunombu). It is made to commemorate how God loved and helped the people of Israel by raining manna and quail during their travel through the desert after being freed from Egypt. Here, *Pidi* symbolically represents manna and *Kozhi* the quail. It also reminds us how the experience of Lent is similar to what the Israelites experienced during their forty years of travel through the desert. When the Syrian Christians partake in this food they are actually becoming part of a religious history connecting them to the Old Testament of the Bible.

The Syrian Christians are known for many *nerchas* or vows that a person promises to undertake in order to be granted a favour or to express thanks for blessings received. Serving meals as part of charity is a vow that is undertaken by many. They might be served among the parishioners for a particular day or festival or among the poor on a particular day. *Pidiyum Kozhiyum* is prepared as part of the *Panthrandu Sleehanmarude Nercha*, in which the vow is to invite twelve men or children, representing the twelve apostles of Jesus and serve them with *pidiyum kozhiyum*. The town of Piravom in the Ernakulam-Kottayam district border is famous for this *nercha* and for serving *pidiyum kozhiyum*.

3.3.3 Snacks and Delicacies

3.3.3.1. *Achappam* (Rose Cookies)

Among the Syrian Christians, *palaharams* or snacks made from rice and coconut is very popular (Eluvathingal 3) and *achappam* is one of them. *Achappam* literally means “bread made using a mold”. It is a deep fried snack made from rice flour. K.T. Achaya identifies it as a traditional Syrian Christian snack in Kerala, though it is made by other communities too. Tanya Abraham observes that “Latin Catholics, Syrian Christians, Anglo-Indians and Jews make this snack known under different names – Rose Cookies for the Anglo-Indians, Atz’afom for the Jews and *Achappam* for the rest” (221). To make this snack, a hot mould or *acchu* is dipped into hot oil and then into the batter made of rice flour, eggs, black sesame or cardamom, sugar, and salt. This makes the batter stick to the mould. After this, the mould is gently immersed into hot oil and the batter is shaken off the mould. “Christians add black sesame seed to the batter, whilst the Jews prefer cardamom” (Abraham 221).

Achappam came from the Dutch influence. *Kokis* - a hard cake of rice flour and coconut milk - is a type of Dutch biscuit. The word *kokis* originated from the Dutch word ‘koekje’ or cookies. It is very popular in Sri Lanka too and was introduced into their culture during their colonial period under the Dutch. *Achappam* originated from this *kokis* and is one of the few traces of Dutch influence on Kerala cuisine. The Dutch reign was very controlled and reined and they did not have an open marriage policy like the Portuguese. Hence, the influence of the Dutch on the Syrian Christian cuisine is an example of how cultural interactions takes place through food even when there are very few interactions between two ethnic communities, that is, how food acts as a bridge between different communities.

3.3.3.2. Neyyappam (Molasses Fritters)

Neyyappam is a snack item literally meaning pancake (appam) made of ghee (neyy). It is made from toddy fermented rice and jaggery. K.T. Achaya in his *Indian Food History* calls it a “Syrian appam”. It is especially made and served during the prayers and rites conducted after the burial of the dead, like the fortieth-day prayer and annual prayers for the dead. On the death anniversary of the deceased called *chattam* in Malayalam, the daughters of the deceased are supposed to make this dish as an offering. After the rituals at the church, the *neyyappams* are distributed among the relatives, loved ones, and parishioners, letting them be part of the prayer for the deceased. The practice also helped those who could not come for the actual ceremony to be part of the anniversary when the family shared the blessed *neyyappams* with them.

Though it is considered a Syrian Christian dish, *neyyappam* is offered in temples too as prasadhams or blessed offerings. In churches also it is often made as *nercha* for the feasts of saints, and like in temples, the priests bless the food offered and distribute it among the faithful. Among the Jews, this dish is made for Hanukkah as a sweet dish. The extent of cultural interactions between the different religious communities can be seen from the number of foods they share and similarities in practices surrounding these foods.

3.3.3.3. Churuttu (Roasted Rice Cones)

Churuttu is made from *Avalos podi* (Roasted Rice and Coconut Mixture) and is a traditional Syrian Christian sweet. It is made in the shape of a cone and has a translucent outer casing (*mandaka*) made of rice flour. It is a savoury that is served especially during weddings and for festivals like Christmas. In *Native Life in Travancore*, Samuel Mateer describes how on the third

day of the wedding, the bride's relatives serve *churuttu* to the guests, and says that this sweet is "thought indispensable at Syrian weddings, and peculiar to that people" (Mateer 164).

3.3.3.4. Kozhukatta

Kozhukatta is a sweet dish made from rice flour dough and grated coconut filling, which is eaten as part of breakfast and as a snack. It is also a popular savoury in Tamil Nadu. In many other Indian states, it is known as *modak* and is believed to be the favourite sweet of Lord Ganesha. According to S.K. Vasanthan, only the *Namboothiris* and Syrian Christians were allowed to consume snack items like *kozhukatta*, *neyyappam*, and *ayini appam* (489).

Though it is made often in the Syrian Christian houses, it is ritualistically made on the day Saturday between the 40th day of Lent or the *nalpatham velli* (literally fortieth Friday) and Palm Sunday. This day is observed as *Kozhukatta Perunnal* or the *kozhukatta* festival among the Syrian Christians, especially the Syrian Catholics. The preparation of *kozhukatta* on this day has a biblical symbolism behind it. It is made to commemorate the hospitality offered to Jesus by Martha and Maria, the sisters of Lazarus.

In chapters eleven and twelve of the Gospel of John, two incidents are narrated which are associated with Martha, Maria, and Lazarus. In John 11, the resurrection of Lazarus of Bethany - the brother of Martha and Maria - who had died due to disease, by Jesus is narrated. After resurrecting Lazarus, it is said that Jesus withdrew himself to the town of Ephraim fearing the plots by the chief priests and Pharisees (John 11:54). Though no exact day is mentioned, the incident is said to have happened close to the Jewish Passover (11:55). Six days before Passover, Jesus again visits Bethany and the family of Martha and Maria prepares dinner for him. At this dinner Maria pours a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume, from an alabaster jar on the feet of

Jesus and wipes it with her hair, filling the house with the fragrance of the perfume (12: 1-8). The *kozhukatta* with its white exterior symbolises the alabaster jar in this biblical story and the sweet smell of jaggery, coconut and spices like cardamom that comes out when a hot *kozhukatta* is broken symbolises the fragrance of the perfume.

The anointment of Jesus by Maria itself is a symbolic act. Among the Jews, there used to be a practice of anointing the dead body with perfume before burying it. When she anoints Jesus with nard, Maria is performing this ritual as within a week, Jesus is killed. This can also be seen from Jesus's dialogue in John 12:7. Here Jesus says, "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial". Thus considering Maria's act as equivalent to anointing the dead, a practice that is still followed among the Jews and also among the Syrian Christians.

In earlier days the Lent in Syrian Christian churches of Kerala used to be for forty days starting from the feast of Danaha, and then a separate fast was observed for the Passion Week. There also used to be a practice of celebrating the Fortieth Day as the end of Lent. This was because, for the Eastern and Western churches, Lent also commemorate the forty days of fast taken by Moses and Jesus. But later this practice was not followed and the practice of taking the fifty days of Lent together became the norm among the churches in Kerala ("Nalpatham Velliyil Ninnu Kozhikkatta Shaniyilekk"). Hence, it can be deduced that *Kozhukkatta Perunnal* could have been a celebration of the end of forty days of Lent and the start of the Passion Week Fast.

There are other beliefs too about what *Kozhukatta* represents on *Kozhukkatta Perunnal*. There is an interpretation that *kozhukkatas* represent the stones that were thrown at Jesus during his Crucifixion. This interpretation seems to have stemmed from the round shape of the dish. But associating a food item that is sweet savoury, eating which, was clearly a privilege of the

Syrian Christians, with something unpleasant, sombre – the commemoration of Christ's Passion seems to be unlikely. In his “Family Traditions and Identity of St Thomas Catholics”, Dr. Francis Eluvathingal also strongly objects to this interpretation (8).

Anjana George in her article “Unique Traditions of Easter in Kerala” in *The Times of India*, writes that “It is believed that love is stuffed inside the snack [*kozhukatta*] as it is made of sweetened grated coconut wrapped in a pancake made of rice flour”. It is interesting to note that the two Commandments that Jesus gave had to do with love, and love is considered to be the foundation upon which Christianity is built upon. As a community that calls themselves *nazranis* or the “followers of Jesus of Nazareth”, love would be a concept that is embedded into their value systems. In fact, Dr. Francis Eluvathingal, though he is only speaking about a subsection of this community, notes that the customary greeting of the community “unites the family members in love and communion” (7). Also, the community members are courteous towards guests and even “strangers and foreigners” (6). Thus, commemorating a feast given for Jesus with such a grand show of respect and the deep love that is described in the Bible as Jesus having for the family in Bethany, and them for him, represents the value system of the community.

Ancy Abraham in her article “4 Lent Foods of Kerala Christians” in the *Lifestyle Today News*, opines that, *Kozhukatta Saturday* commemorates the resurrection of Lazarus and that *kozhukatta* was the favourite food of Jesus which was given to him by the family of Bethany. This is an interesting belief because as mentioned earlier, *kozhukkata* or modak as it is better known is believed to be the favourite food of Lord Ganesha. Hence, we can see how myths and beliefs regarding food also get adopted by communities as they adopt food practices of other communities. In the Syrian Christian community’s case, the community appropriated their older myths to suit their new beliefs.

The similarity of myths also points out how the basic structure of cuisine and practices and beliefs related to food stay unchanged even while changes in different aspects of a community's identity occurs. Also, the presence of this food item all over India with different names, shapes, and meanings associated with it shows how food cultures get shared over a period of time and are adapted to suit the culture of the interacting communities. It acts as a bridge between communities that may have different values, as a translation with the communities domesticising it to suit their own culture.

3.3.4 Desserts

The Keralites generally do not have a sweet tooth. Chitrita Banerji notes in her *Eating India: An Odyssey into the Food and Culture of the Land of Spices* that, “[t]he South, I was reminded, has less of a sweet tooth than the rest of the country; even the Southern gods don’t seem to mind the absence of man-made sweets in their offerings” (199). The Malayalis rarely prepare special sweets to eat as dessert after the meal. Instead, they end their meals with sweet fruits like mango, jackfruit or banana, or they mash plantain in yoghurt and have it with sweet palm syrup, else they make use of the stock of previously made sweets like *halwas*, *churuttu*, or *cheedas*. Sweets like *payasam* are made almost exclusively for special occasions.

The Syrian Christians of Kerala too follow the same pattern, contrary to beliefs about the Christian community among people outside the state, who consider that as they are Christians, they would have a constant supply of cakes and would be regularly consuming them. Chitrita Banerji notes that "Although I had already discovered that the South does not have the same predilection for sweets that one sees in the North, or in Bengal, I was still surprised that, except

for important religious occasions like Christmas or Easter, cakes don't figure all that much on the Syrian Christian menu" (210).

On special occasions, the Syrian Christians too used to make *payasam*. But the advent of western influences introduced cakes, puddings, and soufflés to their cuisine, which were prepared with fresh local produce. *Indian Cookery Book: A Practical Handbook to the Kitchen in India*, a cookbook published in 1880 in Calcutta (and adapted to the three presidencies) for English housekeepers in India and contains recipes of Indian foods, has, in its selection of recipes of desserts "Coconut Pudding", "Coconut Cheesecake" etc. The cookbook *Suriani Kitchen* by Latika George, first published in 2009, contains recipes for "Mango Mousse", "Coconut Milk and Molasses Pudding", "Tender Coconut Pudding" etc. This shows a mixing of western influences and local culture to create a new cuisine that is unique to the locals.

3.3.4.1 Cakes

Cake as a dish itself has undergone tremendous changes in terms of texture, ingredients, and methods of preparation over the years and across the world. The initial cakes were mostly bread sweetened with honey to which nuts and dried fruits were often added. According to Food Timeline Library, "the precursors of modern cakes (round ones with icing) were first baked in Europe sometime in the mid-17th century". It was only in the middle of the 19th century that cakes made with extra refined white flour and baking powder were made.

The baking of the first cake in India is popularly attributed to Mambally Bappu from Thalassery, Kerala, who baked the cake in his Royal Biscuit Factory in November 1883 under the orders of Murdoch Brown, a British planter ("An Xmas Cake Story: Baked in India in 1883"). But this seems to be unlikely because the *Indian Cookery Book* published in 1880 gives a recipe

for “A Two-pound or One-seer Plum Cake”, which the author tells, is the “favourite cake for Christmas, weddings, birthdays, and christenings in India” and the recipe calls for a brisk bakers oven, which implies that ovens and cake baking were indeed present in India by that time (65). In *Raj at Table*, David Burton lists the problems faced while baking cakes: “Primitive ovens and the rarity of fine flour, properly washed butter which was free of buttermilk, and yeast” (as qtd in Doctor). This might have been true at a time when cakes, as we know them today made with fine flour, became popular. But the presence of *bormas* (native firewood ovens) in Kerala from the time of the Portuguese would discredit the complete absence of ovens or of cakes being not made earlier than 1883. Whatever might the origins be and however late its entry has been into the Syrian Christian culture, cakes have now become a part of the Syria Christian cuisine and is a must for festivals like Christmas and Easter.

The most popular cake among Syrian Christians is plum cakes. These are considered to be the authentic Christmas cake, and even though chocolate cakes and other flavoured cakes have become popular in Kerala, plum cakes are still a must for Christmas. In these cakes, they include as ingredients native spices like cinnamon, ginger, clove and cardamom, nativising the English recipe. During Christmas, they bake cakes and distribute them among friends, neighbours and family as a token of love. According to Latika George, “In the early 1990s, when the fine art of icing elaborate cakes had taken the skilled housewives of the Syrian Christian community by storm, each tried to outdo the other. Women vied to produce the finest cake icing with the most realistic roses and the laciest lattice work” (219). The use of cakes only for festivals like Christmas or Easter shows how the Syrian Christians have, while absorbing foreign influences, held on tightly to their native identity as Keralites. Hence, cakes represent the religious identity of Syrian Christians.

3.3.4.2 Puddings

Puddings are eaten as dessert or savoury. But in Kerala, it is eaten only as dessert. The most made would be bread puddings and leftover bread would be utilised for this. As it is quite easy to whip up, it was often made when guests arrive at short notice and have to be entertained with food. The Syrian Christians added their own flavours to these foreign desserts. Coconut pudding and cinnamon pudding (cinnamon added to vanilla pudding giving it a slightly spicy taste) was two of the most common adaptation.

3.3.5. Consumption of Alcohol

A. Sreedhara Menon notes that "till the 16th and 17th centuries, the vast majority of Christians were vegetarians with rice, curry and milk being their main items of food". He says that "in the 16th and 17th century beef eating had not come into vogue among the community and they were not addicted to alcohol". Writing in 1839, Rev. James Hough also expresses a similar opinion on the Syrian Christians. In his *History of Christianity in India*, he says that they are "remarkable for their sobriety, none but the lowest of them ever taking wine, ardent spirits, or fermented liquors" (326). But Ayyar opines that the use and sale of alcohol was popular among the Syrian Christians at one time and it was the Synod of Diamper which tried to put a stop to it (240). The Decree XVIII of Session IX of the Synod prohibits the selling of arrack in Syrian Christian establishments in order to reform the "great debauchery of many, and especially the poorer sort in drinking oracca [*sic*]" (qtd in Ayyar 240).

The above views lead us to believe that the Syrian Christians used to drink alcohol but that it was a practice that was frowned upon in the community and still is. But it also has to be noted that today the community has a high rate of alcohol consumption. According to the Government of Kerala's

report in 2014 on the impact of alcoholism in Kerala, among adult drinkers, 62.7% were Hindus while 32.6% hailed from the Christian community (Kerala, State Planning Board Evaluation Division 153) though the percentage of the population of Hindus in Kerala according to the 2011 census is 54.73% while only 18.38% were Christians ("Population by Religious Communities").

In popular culture, Christian families are shown to be sharing alcohol with sons and fathers drinking together (*Pappi Appacha*, *Christian Brothers*, etc.). Syrian Christian women are also shown consuming alcohol (*Pothen Vava*, *22 Female Kottayam* etc.). Drinking alcohol is represented as being part of the *Achayan* or *Achayathi* (titles that are often used to address Syrian Christian men and women respectively) identity though there are strict restrictions surrounding alcohol consumption in the community, especially for women.

3.4 Conclusion

The cuisine of the Syrian Christians represents their identity. The presence of food items like erachiolathiyathu, meen vevichathu, kappa etc. shows how ecology has influenced their cuisine and how they are basically Keralites first and foremost. The way the community has indigenised certain food items brought to them by the Portuguese and the British, like the stew or pork vindaloo, is a reflection of how the Syrian Christian community has held on to the local culture despite religious colonialism by Europe. Their religious identity gets reflected mainly in the way they use these food items to celebrate many of their religious festivals and in how they have been influenced by the Christians of Persia and Europe in their cuisine. Food items like kozhukatta, neyyappam, kozhiyum pidium etc. are eaten during festivals and the beliefs surrounding these foods and the meanings they have attributed to them reflects their religious identity as Christians while the fact that they have used or modified and used foods that are already

part of the larger Kerala Hindu cuisine points to their Hindu roots. The heavy use of spices, especially pepper in their cuisine is representative of their early occupation as cultivators and traders of spice and how the spices of Kerala have influenced their culture by enabling their communication with the different foreign traders and their cultures through their trade.

Food has also mediated their relationships with other cultural groups of Kerala and the use of many Syrian Christian foods like fish curry, achappam, erachiolathiyathu, kuzhalappam etc., by other religious groups in Kerala points to this fact. In Kerala, cakes are brought during Christmas irrespective of religion and are shared among friends, family and neighbours. Cultural mediation by food can also be seen in how the Syrian Christian community share their happiness during festivals or celebrations with other religious groups by sharing the food made especially for those occasions.

Thus, food is a system of communication that communicates or signifies several things, which includes an individual's communal identity. The representation of this identity through food can be considered as a translation. Food also acts as a bridge or mediator between the different communities.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

The principal foods of the Syrian Christians are rice and curries made of vegetables and/or meat. The community has no particular food taboos. Prohibitions are enforced only during Lents, which are many, the main one being the *anpathunombu*, the fifty days of Lent that precedes Easter. The cuisine of the Syrian Christian community is influenced by ecology, local traditions and values, maritime trade, colonial relations and religious practices. These factors have also contributed towards the construction of the unique Syrian Christian identity that is different in many aspects to other Christian communities in Kerala and in India, who were converted later by European and indigenous mission works.

The Syrian Christian community of Kerala as the oldest Christian community in India, dating back to before the sixth century (or 52 A.D according to beliefs of the community), has an identity that is deeply rooted in the local traditions of Kerala. Since, in the initial years of its formation, the community enjoyed relative isolation from Christian communities outside Kerala, they could develop an identity that was free of over-bearing influences and hence their practices and customs developed alongside their Hindu brethren. The custom of offerings in churches, the very shape of the churches, customs surrounding marriage like the *minnu kettal* and *madhuras kodukkal* all borrowed or rather retained from Hinduism. Though they received guidance from the Eastern churches, their influence was mostly limited to religious teachings and Episcopal guidance. Though the influences of European colonialism had an impact on their identity and their liturgy they have assimilated these influences and have domesticized them to suit their local practices. This is in contrast to the Latin Catholic and Anglo-Indian communities of Kerala who were more

influenced by the European missionaries and adopted many of their practices and customs, Latinized liturgy being one of the most contrasting characteristics. This difference in attitude towards outside influences can be seen in their food practices too.

Appam and stew is a traditional breakfast of the Syrian Christians. *Appam* reminds one of the close associations that the community had with the Jewish community in Kerala as groups having many similar beliefs and as part of the main trade groups or guilds in the state. The Kerala stew is a native version of the British Brown Stew. It points to how the Syrian Christian community has held on to its native Kerala identity despite colonial influences from groups following the same religion. The domestication of other dishes of foreign origin, like the cakes and puddings, pork *Vindhaloo*, *fish molee*, etc. can be seen as an assertion of their native identity, which they held onto and fought for during the Oath at Coonen Cross.

Consumption of beef by the community brings out their religious identity and the European influence upon them. The Nair community in Kerala with whom they shared many cultural practices and with whom they could be equated by caste did not eat beef, nor did the upper-caste Namboothiri Brahmins whom they mimicked in many ways. Also, beef-eating came into vogue after the 17th century only pointing to European influences.

The *Kudampulli itaa meen curry* is a variety of fish prepared by the Syrian Christians of mid-Travancore. It is representative of the Syrian Christian affinity to spicy food as opposed to the mildly spiced dishes of the Latin community. In preparing *meen pollichatu* the Latin Catholics make use of coconut milk instead of vinegar and pepper instead of red chillies thus reducing the spiciness of the dish. Consumption of mildly spiced food by the Latin community is due to the larger influence of the Portuguese on them.

Kappa vevichathu though not exclusive to the Syrian Christian community is consumed regularly by them. The preference for this food item can be attributed to the Syrian Christians being a landowning class, bringing out their class identity. It also shows their affinity for starch-based foods that is seen among all communities in Kerala.

The foods consumed by the Syrian Christians represent their religious identity more obviously. The community uses many food items that are already present in the local Kerala cuisine in celebrating these festivals, but what these foods connote changes when the community uses these food items as the symbolization changes with the change in beliefs surrounding these foods.

The Pesaha meal of the Syrian Christians, the *pesaha appam* and *paal* commemorates the last supper of Christ. Though the *pesaha appam* is borrowed from the Jewish *matzah*, the belief behind the consumption is very different as the Jews consume this meal to commemorate the Passover. The *Chorukka* is consumed in memory of the passion of Christ on Good Friday by the Syrian Christians while its Jewish counterpart *maror* is consumed by the Jewish community to commemorate Passover on the first day of the Passover. Though these two food items have Jewish origin, the beliefs associated with each are different and hence there is a difference in symbolization, differentiating the religious identity of the Syrian Christians from the Jews.

Pidiyum Kozhiyum is a traditional Syrian Christian dish that is eaten in the northern parts of Kerala. As it was an upper-class upper-caste privilege to have the dish, it points out the class and caste identity of the community and the privileges that the community enjoyed in the state. The specificity of the dish and as the dish is prepared as an offering for various festivals, it points to their religious identity.

The snack items of the Syrian Christians like *achappam* and *churuttu* are intricately prepared. *Achappam* is a remnant of Dutch influence on the community. The use of the name *achappam* itself shows the stronghold that the community had on its native roots. The Jews call *achappam* Atz'afom and the Anglo-Indian call it rose cookies.

Neyyappam is a Syrian Christian food that is now offered even in temples. Though a snack item, it is mainly made by the Syrian Christians during the death anniversary of their loved ones. They share it among parishioners, neighbours and family so that they can partake in the prayer for the deceased. The Jewish community makes this dish for Hanukkah as a sweet dish. Being a Syrian Christian speciality, the presence of this food item in other communities points to the extent of cultural interaction between the different communities and represents the Syrian Christians as a community that kept close interactions and were tolerable to other religious communities.

The symbols attributed to *kozhukkatta* when eaten on the Saturday before Palm Sunday shows how the community has borrowed local foods and beliefs and has converted them to suit their own beliefs and practices. Also, the meanings associated with the dish, love and respect, is considered the foundation of the Syrian Christian identity.

The desserts of the Syrian Christian community like cakes and puddings have come from western influences. Christmas cakes are a symbol of the religious identity of Syrian Christians. These items have become part of other celebrations and special occasions only recently.

Language translates or represents our ideas and thoughts to others. Hence, the shared language of cuisine can translate the conceptual maps shared by a community (which includes our cultural identity) to members outside the community. Thus, when the Syrian Christian cuisine represents the community's identity to others through the customs, beliefs, festivals, and relationships

surrounding food, the ingredients used, the methods of preparation, etiquettes and eating habits, and through their selection of food – their staples, delicacies etc. – a translation takes place. Hence, we can conclude that the Syrian Christian cuisine translates the identity of their community.

Thus, the cuisine of the Syrian Christian community is influenced by ecology, local traditions and values, maritime trade, colonial relations and religious practices. These factors have also contributed towards the construction of the unique Syrian Christian identity that is different in many aspects to other Christian communities in Kerala and in India, who were converted later by European and indigenous mission works. Food is a system of communication that communicates or signifies several things, which includes an individual's communal identity. The cuisine of the Syrian Christians represents the identity of the Syrian Christians and this representation is a translation.

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