

SYRIAC SACRED CHANT: IT'S ROLE IN SHAPING LITURGICAL LIFE AND COMMUNAL IDENTITY OF THE SYRIAC COMMUNITY

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So outstanding is the nature of Syriac sacred music—when the sacred word (text) is fused with the sound (music) creates an extra ordinary power through which the faithful can attain their spiritual goals and lift themselves up from the ordinary to the higher level of consciousness— that the Syriac poet-theologians and hymnographers chose this phenomenon 1600 years ago to knit their prose and poetry that laid the foundation of Syriac rich musical heritage. Their hymns give not only religious reference to and offers a strong view of the liturgical rite and faith of the Syriac church, but also forms an important part of the Syriac both religious and cultural identity, ideology, symbols, moral values, and the collective cultural memory of Syriac Christians.

A very short overview of the Syriac chant will promote our understanding as well as the significance of this musical phenomenon.

Syriac sacred chant, is one of the oldest existing chant traditions (similar to the western tradition of plainsong), composed in Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic, the language that was spoken by Jesus Christ, together with their melodies.

Among the large number of distinct features that are embedded in Syriac sacred chant, a) simplicity in text and melody (so that the theological reasoning that lays behind the text would be easily comprehended by diverse communities, simple worshippers and monastics to embrace the Word of God), b) along with sacred text, various musical characteristics of Syriac chant such as the microtonal variation of intervals, words in metrics, the melodic construction, dynamics, modal system of eight—which represent the impressive formulae of the earlier evolution of the Syriac church in the field of ecclesiastical music—are a couple of vital entities that function in tandem to produce a consistent, compelling, and spiritual sacred chant.

Syriac chant is the musical heritage of the Syriac people.¹ Historically, the Syriac Orthodox have resided in the territories of modern Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and other regions of the Middle East. Their main cultural foci have been Mosul (especially the environs of the Monastery of Mor Mattai), Tur'Abdin (“the mountain of the servants [of God]” around Midyat), Amid (modern Diyarbakır), Edessa/Urhoy (the cradle of Syriac culture, on the site of Urfa in modern Turkey), Antioch (modern Antakya; the head of the Syriac Orthodox Church is still called

¹ In various times and places diverse groups of Syriac-speaking Christians have been known by a plethora of names including Syrian, Jacobite, Maronite, Aramean, Assyrian, and Nestorian. Syriac people are also referred to as *Suroyé* (in Turoyo/Surayt, a Neo-Aramaic dialect), in classical Syriac as *Suryoyé*, in Arabic as *Suryan(i)*, in Kurdish as *fellahi* (in the sense of “Christians”), and in Turkish as *Süryani(ler)*. In the Ottoman Empire the Syriac community was given *millet* status in the late nineteenth century as *Süryani Kadim*. All these designations have been used to identify the Syriac people and the Syriac Church. In this short article, I employ the word “Syriac” to identify the people by the liturgical language of their Churches.

“the Patriarch of Antioch and of All the East”), Aleppo, Homs, Nabak, and Sadad (all in modern Syria).

Due to their faith and their strategically important geographical location—a bridge between empires, Mesopotamia was occupied by the Romans, the Byzantines, and the Persians; then, in succession, the Muslims, the Mongols, the Seljuks, and the Ottomans conquered it—the Syriac population, as it is today, had to migrate whenever a change of political power in the region occurs.

Syriac people, as the successors of St. Ephrem (*ca.* 306-373), Jacob of Serugh (450-521) and other poet-theologians, represent the early eastern Christian song with unique musical characteristics: congregational/collective singing (Syriac liturgical rite is exclusively singing rather than saying), participation of women in singing² (known as daughters of the covenant or *bnoth qyomo*, since the 4th century), and singing hymns in various genres alternately (singing between two groups or *gudê*).

Given that Syriac chant has a great input in the formation of the Syriac Christian belief, it is right to say that Syriac chant is a symbol of both religious and cultural identity of the Syriac community. Sacred hymns/music, as a dual functioning entity—throughout centuries was used not only to observe religious ceremonies (e.g., baptism), but also social gatherings (e.g., festivity after the wedding ceremony). This act demonstrates that both social and religious lives of the Syriac people revolve around church. Given that the identity is a concrete reality in people’s daily lived experience, sacred music as cultural expression exists in and through performance, can be seen as one of the cornerstones of Syriac identity formation.

It is not only hymnological (musical, textual, and theological) aspects that determine the formation of the hymnic identity of the Syriac people, but also cultural, ideological, anthropological-psychological, nationalist views play a crucial role. Hymn singing is a cultural, political, and ideology practice as religion itself, therefore, hymns represent the cultural identity, self-concept, and symbols of the Syriac people. To put it more simply, *what they sing is who they are*.

Despite the denominational differences of Syriac churches—Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Syriac Maronite, (“Assyrian”) Church of the East, Chaldean, Syro- Malabar and Syro-Malankara—and historical name differences of the Syriac community—Aramean, Assyrian, Chaldean etc.—Syriac chants and music, provide, especially in the diaspora, a strong communal bond and creates a platform where members of all these churches can identify themselves as a branch of the mother “Syriac Church of Antioch” through hymn singing (the division of the Syriac

² Polycarpus Augin Aydin, “A Wedding Feast of Song?: St. Ephrem and the Singing Ministry of Women in the Church”, in Dorothea Weltecke, ed. *Geschichte, Theologie, Liturgie und Gegenwartslage der syrischen Kirchen. Beiträge zum sechsten deutschen Syrologen-Symposium in Konstanz, Juli 2009*. Göttinger Orientforschungen, I. Reihe: Syriaca 40. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012), 59-64. See also Joseph Phillip Amar, ed. *A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem by Mar Jacob of Sarug: Critical Edition of the Syriac Text, Translation and Introduction*. (Patrologia Orientalis 47:1. Turnhout: Brepols, 1995).

church into branches). It is not only about the religion, being part of the Syriac church, but also about being a part of the Syriac-speaking people—thus part of a people with a specific history and view of their collective story. When they all join together in singing, they join in the history of the Syriac people who are being persecuted for their faith and had to flee to foreign countries.

The way the book of Psalms played a crucial role in helping the Jewish community to remember its covenant with YWH, a covenant which formed its sense of identity, Syriac chants of various genres, such as *qolé* (chants), *mimré* (verse homilies), *madrosbé* (responsorial teaching songs), *sugyotho* (a sub-group of responsorial teaching songs, often in the form of dialogues), too, resonate in the hearts and minds of Syriac people living in the diaspora, and reminds them of their life of faith (both praises and curses, lamentation and thanksgiving, supplication and receiving), and who they are supposed to be since the destruction of their holy places and lands in Iraq, Syria, Turkey (for centuries) which had eroded not only morale but communal identity itself. Syriac chants do necessarily correspond to the sad circumstance that the Syriac community is in today, but the Syriac community has always opted for a more supplicatory theological approach to respond to these circumstances. For example, the *madrosbo* (responsorial teaching song) of St Ephrem on the siege of his home town, Nisibis, by the Persians:³

Lord, my chicks have flown,
left their nest, alarmed
by the eagle. Look,
where they hide in dread!
Bring them back in peace!

At my ears' command,
hark, my vintagers' voice!
No: their songs are gone.
Let me hear the boom
news of rescue prompts!

What a fearful sound
on my turrets, now!
These, my rescuers
guard my walls and shout.
Peace shall drown them out!

Peace outside my wall:
peasants bantering!
Peace inside my wall:
urban traffic's din!
Such will be my thanks!

Free your board so clean,

³ Ephrem of Nisibis, *Carmina Nisibena* 4: 23-28. Cited in Hans Hollerweger, *TURABDIN: Lebendiges Kulturerbe / Living Cultural Heritage / Canlı Kültür Mirası* (Linz, Austria: Freunde des Turabdin, 1999), 362.

Lord, of mourning-cloth
and your priest so chaste,
standing there in black,
swathed, above, in sack!

Church and those who serve,
town and those who dwell
in them, thank you: Lord,
let the sound of peace
by their hymns' reward!

Syriac chants continue to play a vital role in the life of the Syriac church and its people—it embodies a legacy of knowledge and spirituality, creating an identity, expressing emotions, revisiting the past, telling stories, and shaping the future.

Syriac chant also bears rich testimony that in joy and sorrow, in praise and lament, the Syriac community raises their voices in song to God. Again, a good example is provided by St Ephrem where he imaginatively has Nisibis address God, comparing herself to the Ark of Noah in the Flood:⁴

Lord, give joy to those who are enclosed within my fortresses,
You who gave joy to those enclosed [in the Ark]
by means of the olive [leaf]; (Gen. 8:11)
You sent a healing doctor by means of the dove
to those who were languishing and afflicted by all kinds of waves;
he entered and drove out all their pains,
for joy at his [coming] swallowed up [their] grief;
he dismissed sorrow by means of the comfort [he brought]
and like a captain
he gave encouragement to those afraid,
sowing a word [of courage] in place [hitherto] deserted.
[Their] eyes tasted the sight of peace
and [their] mouths were quick to open and praise You. (Ps. 51:15)
Preserve me, like the olive [branch], on the waves,
and make those enclosed within my walls rejoice at me.

When the chant tunes (which were transmitted only through the channel of oral tradition throughout generation) commensurate with the sense of the sacred text are capable of evoking powerful emotions (e.g., patriotic, identity, unity) in the hearts of the Syriac community.

Today, whether in the homeland or the diaspora, the collective utterances of chants provide Syriac Christians not only with the power to attain their spiritual goals but is also a powerful mechanism for bonding and shaping their communal identity and religious life. Apart from their

⁴ Sebastian P. Brock and George A. Kiraz, *Ephrem the Syrian: Select Poems: Vocalized Syriac text with English translation, introduction and notes* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2006), 237.

theological and liturgical meanings, Syriac chants are also used as a device to stabilize and preserve the collective memory of the Syriac people in a period of uncertainty and integration to other cultures.

Finally, Syriac chant remains the living embodiment of a greatly theological manifesto of the Syriac Orthodox faith; thus, it can legitimately be viewed as part of the Holy and Sacred Tradition.