

Title of presentation as announced in Program Book: *“Cochin Jewish Women’s Folk Songs in India and Israel,”* by Barbara Johnson.

Barbara Johnson is a cultural anthropologist who has studied and written about the Jews of Kerala for more than 30 years and has lived in India as well as in Israel. She edited the CD/book *Oh, Lovely Parrot: Jewish Women’s Songs from Kerala* (Jerusalem 2004) and co-authored *Ruby of Cochin: An Indian Jewish Woman Remembers* (JPS 1995) with the late Cochini song expert Ruby Daniel. Recently retired from Ithaca College, where she was Associate Professor of Anthropology and Coordinator of Jewish Studies, she is now a Visiting Scholar in the South Asia Program at Cornell University.

Description:

After a brief introduction to the varied Jewish communities of India, this presentation will center on the “Cochin” Jews of Kerala and their traditional women’s music. The Kerala Jews lived in peace and security for perhaps 2000 years on the tropical southwest coast of India, until most of them migrated to Israel beginning in the 1950s. For many centuries Cochin Jewish women have performed songs in Malayalam, the language of Kerala - songs for weddings and other life-cycle events, biblical narratives, devotional hymns, and songs about the history and legends of their community. With the move to Israel these songs were in danger of being forgotten. Fortunately they are being brought back to performance revival in Israel, and scholarly publications about them are reaching an international audience. Discussion of the songs and of some of the Kerala Jewish women who sing them will be illustrated with video excerpts from recent performances.

Kerala Jewish Women's Folksongs: A Story of New Life

Presented at the 2009 AJL meetings in Chicago

Dr. Barbara C. Johnson

The "Cochin" Jews lived a peaceful and observant Jewish life for perhaps 2000 years in Kerala, on the lush green tropical Malabar coast of southwest India. Most of them made *aliyah* in the 1950s – but the Kochinim in Israel will tell you with pride how they were respected in their Kerala home, without experiencing anti-Semitism from their Indian neighbors.

There are many legends about how their ancestors arrived in Kerala. Some are preserved in Jewish women's songs, sung in Malayalam, the language of the area. Kerala has been a cross-road of international commerce for many centuries, as illustrated by this map of ancient sea-trading routes¹, and it's possible that Jews may have travelled there first during the Roman trading period. Scholars have described Malayalam culture as a rich hybrid of Hindu, Muslim, Christian and Jewish features.

If you go to Cochin (now spelled Kochi) today, you'll probably visit the exquisite 450 year-old Paradesi Synagogue, a leading tourist attraction in the neighborhood still known as Jewtown.² But this is not the only synagogue remaining in Kerala - though it is the only one still open regularly for prayers. For centuries there were eight separate but interconnected Jewish communities, each with its own synagogue. Within just a ten minute walk to the other end of Kochi's "Jewtown" neighborhood, you can reach a large building with no outward trace of its

¹ For copyright reasons, I will include only a few of the pictures from my PowerPoint presentation, but will note some relevant websites. For a map of trade routes see: <http://www.vhinkle.com/africa/indianoceantrade.gif>.

² Photo 1 © Barbara C. Johnson

former glory -- the Kadavumbhagam Synagogue, built in 1544.³ You must go to Jerusalem to see its magnificent wooden interior, restored and reconstructed in the Israel Museum.⁴

Returning our attention to Kerala... just across the harbor from Kochi is the bustling modern city of Ernakulam, where two more synagogues are still standing and several Jewish families still live.⁵ Then if you can find a car and a guide to take you north of Kochi and Ernakulam, you'll pass through the lush green Kerala countryside, with its inland waterways, coconut palms and rice paddies.⁶ It's no wonder I've heard Kochinim in Israel refer to Kerala as Gan Eden! Traveling north, you'll have the opportunity to visit three smaller towns that used to have substantial Jewish communities, giving you a sense of why eight of the Malayalam Jewish songs were composed in praise of particular synagogues.

The old synagogue of Chendamangalam, recently restored by the Kerala Archaeological Department, contains a small museum of photos and information about the Jews of Chendamangalam.⁷ The synagogue in North Parur will soon be restored as part of Kerala's ambitious new "Muziris Project" for historical tourism in the area.⁸ The inland town of Mala also boasts a beautiful synagogue and a charming Malayalam Jewish song about its origins.⁹

Now let me introduce you to the Malayalam-language songs traditionally sung by Jewish women in Kerala. These include wedding songs, Biblical narratives (filled with *midrash*), legends of Jewish origins in Kerala, and devotional hymns (some original, some translated or adapted from Hebrew *piyyutim*). Some of the melodies resemble those of other Kerala folk or

³ Photo 2 © Barbara C. Johnson

⁴ On the Israel Museum website you can find information about this synagogue interior:
<http://www.imj.org.il//imagine/collections/item.asp?itemNum=199804>

⁵ <http://samgrubersjewishartmonuments.blogspot.com/2009/08/india-isjms-jay-aronker-further.html>

⁶ Photo 3, ©Barbara C. Johnson

⁷ <http://chensyn.com/brochure/CochinBrochure.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.keralatourism.org/muziris/>

⁹ Photo 4, ©Barbara C. Johnson

popular songs, and some are shared with songs from the Kerala Hebrew repertoire (which the women know as well as the men). In India the Malayalam songs were performed at home and at community gatherings for festive occasions, with men listening respectfully as the women sang.

A cooperative international project has resulted in a large collection of Malayalam Jewish song texts. The lyrics of approximately 300 songs (many with multiple variants) are preserved in handwritten women's notebooks (some more than a century old) which were collected or photocopied in India and Israel.¹⁰ More than 80 songs performed by Kochini women have been recorded, some with variant tunes. These notebooks and recordings are archived at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where they are being digitized – the notebooks in the Ben-Zvi Research Institute and the recordings in the Sound Archives of Jewish Music Research Center (JMRC).

The story of these photocopies and recordings began in the mid 1970s. I had learned about the existence of the Jewish women's songs while researching and writing my MA thesis on Kerala Jewish history, and I realized the danger that they would soon be lost, as younger generations of Kochinim in Israel did not speak Malayalam. With a small grant, I made my third trip to Kochi and began recording songs from a few older women who still remembered them. At almost exactly the same time Israeli anthropologist Shirley Isenberg was taking time off from her research on the Bene Israel to travel throughout Israel in search of Kochini women who still remembered and could record the old Malayalam Jewish songs.

"Oh Lovely Parrot" is the title song of a CD/booklet of Malayalam Jewish songs, which was finally published almost 30 years later, in 2004, by the Jewish Music Research Center.¹¹ Half the 42 songs on this CD were recorded between 1976 and 1981 and the rest about 20

¹⁰ For more details on the song collection, see Johnson 2001, "Till the Women Finish Singing: An Historical Overview of Cochin Jewish Women's Malayalam Songs." *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies*, 4:7-22.

¹¹ Photo 5, ©Jewish Music Research Centre. The 126-page booklet included with the CD includes an introduction and notes in English and Hebrew, and an English translation for each of the 42 songs

years later. For copyright reasons, I can include here only a sample of three songs.¹² The first excerpt you can hear on the JMRC website is the “Blessing Song” for weddings, circumcisions and other occasions, which I recorded in Kochi in 1977. The third song on the website, a *midrash* on “When Moshe Received Knowledge”, was recorded in Israel in 1981 through the efforts of Shirley Isenberg. The second song on the website, “The Fifth of Iyyar”, recorded in 2002 during a process I’ll describe below, is a Zionist song composed in Kerala in the 1950s and set to an Indian cinema tune – Bollywood meets *aliyah*!

In 1977, the Jewish women singers I recorded in Kochi told me I must go to Israel and collect songs from Dolly Japheth, an older woman who had been their teacher before making *aliyah*. Through Dolly Japheth I met her niece Ruby Daniel (1912-2001) and their remarkable family of musical women.¹³ The oldest song notebook in our collection dates from about 1850, probably hand-written by a great great great aunt of Ruby’s.¹⁴

In 1995 Ruby Daniel and I co-authored her memoir *Ruby of Cochin: An Indian Jewish Woman Remembers* (Jewish Publication Society), which includes translations of 13 of the Malayalam women’s songs. That same year, the Israel Museum opened their permanent display of the restored interior of the Kadavumbhagam Synagogue, along with a grand temporary exhibit on the three Jewish communities of India. As part of the festivities, the museum invited a group of Kochini women to sing a few of their traditional songs.¹⁵ After singing two songs in Hebrew, when they sang one in Malayalam, Kochini members of the audience clapped along with enthusiasm. Though at the time it didn’t occur to me as even a remote possibility, I would now date this evening as the tentative beginning of a performance revival for the Malayalam Jewish songs.

¹²Please go to the website of the Jewish Music Research Center: <http://www.jewish-music.huji.ac.il/>. To locate the appropriate page, click on “JMRC Store”, then “CDs”; then scroll down the titles and click on “Oh, Lovely Parrot”, where you will have access to excerpts from the three songs.

¹³ Photo 6, ©Barbara C. Johnson

¹⁴ Photo 7, ©Barbara C. Johnson

¹⁵ Photo 8, ©Barbara C. Johnson

When the book was finished, Ruby Daniel asked me “What’s next? “ and replied to her own question: “More translations.” We worked intensively together over the next few years, producing about 100 more English translations, some of them detailed, some rough. But there were many older songs with obscure language which Ruby couldn’t make out. As she often reminded me, she wasn’t getting any younger. She began to decisively advise me: “Go to Kerala and find a professor!”

In 1999 I went to Kerala and made the acquaintance of Dr. Scaria Zacharia, a noted professor of Malayalam language and literature, who took up the study of the Jewish songs with great dedication and enthusiasm.¹⁶ The following summer he came to Israel to work on the project, and one of his first requests was that I take him to meet “Ruby-Aunty”, whose health was declining. At his request, she blessed his work by singing him the “Blessing Song”.

The development of scholarly interest in the songs took a leap forward once Scaria Zacharia visited Israel and became directly involved in the project. The Jewish Music Research Center agreed to produce a CD with selections from their archives – but they couldn’t use many of the old recordings because of the poor sound quality. So four talented Kochini women agreed to study and practice and re-record some of the songs which had been recorded 20 years earlier by their older relatives. Two of them were Ruby Daniel’s younger sister Rahel Kala and her niece Venus Lane.¹⁷ As the performance revival began to emerge, they were central to the process.

Another key person in the song revival was Galia Hacco, a retired social worker who left Kerala to make *aliyah* as a teenager, married an Egyptian Jewish scientist in Israel, and now in her retirement was eager to get back in touch with her Kerala roots. She organized a support group of women to talk about their early years in India, and soon they became interested in learning the old Malayalam songs. They met once a month, travelling to the Tel Aviv area from

¹⁶ Photo 9, ©Barbara C. Johnson

¹⁷ Photo 10, ©Barbara C. Johnson

different parts of the country.¹⁸ This group soon organized itself as a performance group, taking the name “Nirit Singers”. Their first big public performances were in 2005, to celebrate the simultaneous release of the CD “Oh Lovely Parrot” and a book on the songs by Scaria Zacharia.

Professor Zacharia had insisted that the first scholarly publication on the Malayalam songs should be bi-lingual – the texts and commentaries in Malayalam for the Kerala audience, and a Hebrew translation and commentary, for the younger generation of Kochinim in Israel who speak and read Hebrew. The result was his publication *Karkulali-Yefefiyah- Gorgeous!: Jewish Women’s Songs in Malayalam with Hebrew Translations* (Ben-Zvi Institute, 2005).¹⁹ The Hebrew translation of and commentary on the songs in this book was assigned to an Israeli graduate student in linguistics, Ophira Gamliel, who was already an expert in Sanskrit. Gamliel is not Kochini and she hadn’t yet studied Malayalam, so for this book she worked with Zacharia from his English translation. In the past five years she has immersed herself in the study of Malayalam and recently completed her PhD thesis for the Hebrew University – a groundbreaking philological analysis of the corpus of Malayalam Jewish songs and of the dialect which she identifies as Jewish Malayalam.²⁰ Ruby Daniel would be amazed!

As for the Nirit Singers, they have gone on to perform at Kochini and other Israeli events, including a May 2006 appearance at the prestigious Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem.²¹ That same year five members of the group travelled to India to participate in an international conference on “the Jewish Heritage of Kerala”. Last year, in April 2008, two members of the group – Galia Hacco and Venus Lane – travelled to Washington DC for a series of programs on

¹⁸ Photo 11, ©Barbara C. Johnson

¹⁹ Photo 12, © Ben-Zvi Institute. Edited and translated with introduction and critical commentary by Scaria Zacharia [Malayalam] and Ophira Gamliel [Hebrew] and an Afterword by Barbara C. Johnson [English].

²⁰ Ophira Gamliel. 2009. *Jewish Malayalam Women’s Songs*. Ph.D. Thesis, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem. See also her article “Oral Literary Forms in Jewish Malayalam”, *Journal of Judaic Studies* Vol. 10, 2009.

²¹ To view this performance, go to the Van Leer Institute website at: <http://www.vanleer.org.il/eng/videoShow.asp?id=291> and click on: [ותימן פרס מסורות: ושירה פייטנות](#)

“The Women Who Saved the Songs” (along with Scaria Zacharia, Indian anthropologist Smita Jassal and myself) at the Library of Congress, the University of Maryland and the DC-JCC.²²

In 2008 the Nirit Singers also produced and released their own CD, performing as a group many of the same songs – but this CD is very different from “Oh Lovely Parrot”, for its audience is specifically Israeli.²³ Each recorded song is introduced with a brief explanatory statement in Hebrew, and the enclosed pamphlet is entirely in Hebrew. The Malayalam words of each song are transliterated into Hebrew, so that Kochinim and other Israelis who don’t read Malayalam can learn to sing them. Galia tells me that a new group of Kochini women singers – from the senior center at Moshav Mesillat Zion - performed recently at another *moshav*. Most of them don’t know how to read Malayalam and hadn’t known the traditional songs, but they learned them from this Nirit CD with its Hebrew transliteration

The parrot motif you see on both the cover of the first CD and on Zacharia’s book is from a Kochini ketubah. The parrot is a popular bird in Indian literature, and a number of the Jewish songs are in the *kiLipattu* genre of songs addressed to this bird, the traditional carrier of messages. Multiple messages about Malayalam Jewish songs continue to be sent forth. The Jewish Music Research Center has asked me to edit a volume in their Yuval Music Series including 100 of the songs, with musical transcriptions, English translations, and notes for individual songs, along with several scholarly articles. So the “Story of New Life” for these songs continues, within the Kochini community in Israel and in the wider world of international scholarship and international Jewry. Thank you for your interest – and please spread the word!

²² For an article on this series of events, see: <http://www.rediff.com/news/2008/apr/23look.htm>

²³ Photo 13, ©Galia Hacco. This CD can be ordered from: Galia Hacco, R. Ovadia MeBartenura 21/7, Tel Aviv 62282, Israel.

Bibliography of Books & Audio Recordings on the Jews of India

AJL Conference, Chicago 2009

Dr. Barbara C. Johnson

This brief bibliography is focused on the three long-established Jewish communities of India.

- The **Bene Israel** form the largest group of Indian Jews. Their origin has not been definitively established, but they lived for many centuries in rural villages on the Konkan coastal area south of Bombay (now Mumbai), until they began moving to Bombay and other urban centers in western India in the 19th century. Most of the Bene Israel have migrated to the State of Israel, where their numbers are now estimated at 60,000; about 4,000-5,000 remain in India.
- The **“Baghdadi” Jews** began arriving in India in the late 18th century, mainly from Iraq. Most settled in the two major port cities of Bombay and Calcutta, where their combined populations eventually grew to about 6,000. Almost all the Baghdadi Jews left India after Independence in 1947, some emigrating to Israel and others to the English-speaking countries of the British Commonwealth. To some extent they have always remained a part of the larger Iraqi diaspora.
- The **“Cochin” Jews of Kerala** are the oldest Indian Jewish community. Beginning in the 1950s almost all of them made *aliyah* to Israel, where their numbers have reached between 4,000 and 5,000 today. Only about 70 remain in India.

For a map see: http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://mapsof.net/uploads/static-maps/indian_jews_communities_map

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