

SECTION I  
SONGS OF ORIGIN AND COMMUNITY IDENTITY  
INTRODUCTION

The first five songs in this section are narratives of Kerala Jewish origin. They reflect various folk traditions about community ancestors who moved long ago from the land of Israel to the Malabar coast, and also about the creation of specific Jewish communities through subsequent migrations within Kerala. One narrative thread is the Jewish flight from danger to a safe haven in Kerala; Jews are personified as parrots fleeing from a hunter in song 1 and as refugees from the land of Israel after the destruction of the Second Temple in song 3. Another thread is the arrival of Jewish merchants who came to the coast as traders—Evarayi in song 2 and Moshe Mutaliyar in song 4.

In songs 3 and 4 the original place of settlement in Kerala is Kodungallur (also known as Cranganore—and called “Shingly” in some Kerala Jewish traditions). Despite folkloric references, there is no physical or documentary evidence of any synagogue building in Kodungallur. A few other origin songs mention Kodungallur, but we do not have recordings of them. Found mostly in song notebooks from the Kochi-Paradesi community, they are associated with a mythologized version of the eleventh-century Jewish leader Joseph Rabban, the recipient of economic and symbolic privileges granted by the Chera emperor in a famous copper plate inscription from that century (M.G.S. Narayan 2003). The texts of those songs were quoted in some past scholarly works in relation to the tradition that Joseph Rabban founded the original Kerala Jewish settlement in Kodungallur, referred to in that tradition as “Shingly” (Johnson 1975; Katz 1993, 45–49; Segal 1993, 11–20; Jussay 2005, 105–117).<sup>1</sup>

In this collection of recorded songs, the only echoes of the Shingly/Joseph Rabban tradition are in song 4, about a Jewish merchant who arrives in “Shingly,” and in song 5, which features a unique mythologized version of Joseph Rabban as founder of the Jewish community in Mala.

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<sup>1</sup> See Johnson (1986) for my own reinterpretation of this tradition. Also see Gamliel 2022b for her important critique of this early research, grounded in a comprehensive analysis of pre-colonial sources.

In songs 1, 2, and 5 the original place of Jewish settlement is Palur (Palayur), another city on the coast north of Kodungallur. There is more tangible evidence of an early Jewish presence there in the report of a seventeenth-century visitor from Amsterdam who was told by Jews in Kochi that one synagogue still remained in Palur, with a membership of ten families (Pereyra de Paiva 1687, in Timberg 1986, 126). There is also this Hebrew inscription on a very old, gold-plated rimon (Torah finial) from Kerala: “This is the rimon of the Palu(r?) synagogue, the year 1564/5” (Slapak 1995, 61).

Except for song 1, each origin song here mentions the laying of a foundation to build a synagogue in the new place of settlement, and this theme carries through the following songs in section I, which describe and celebrate individual synagogues. The Malayalam word *paḷḷi* refers to a place of worship for any of the monotheistic religions—a church, a mosque, or a synagogue—and the Jewish *paḷḷi* songs share some features with *paḷḷi* songs of their St. Thomas Christian neighbors.

Section I includes seven *paḷḷi* songs, one each for seven of the eight Kerala Jewish communities. Each song describes and praises specific features of the synagogue building, in addition to its foundation. Two or more songs mention the walled compound; the tiled roof; the hanging lamps; the fine wooden carvings; the Torah ark (*heikhal*); the central pulpit or reader’s stand (*tebah*); and the women’s section on the upper floor, connected to the upper *tebah*.<sup>2</sup>

Songs 5, 8 and 9 mention festive celebrations carried out to mark the beginning or completion of the building process, including gifts presented to the *paḷḷi* by non-Jews and by members of other Jewish communities. Women singers have recalled that these synagogue songs were sung on occasions such as the celebration of a synagogue renovation, or the dedication of a new Torah scroll. Because these celebrations would bring together members of the different Jewish communities, it is not surprising to find the *paḷḷi* song of any one community in the notebooks and sung repertoire of women from other communities.

Section I concludes with three shorter songs preserved in oral memory rather than in the women’s notebooks. Relating to particular Jewish communities (two from

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<sup>2</sup> See Eliyahu-Oron and Johnson 2021 for a detailed description and analysis of Kerala synagogue architecture and history.

Kochi and one associated with Chendamangalam), these three were offered spontaneously by singers interviewed and recorded by Isenberg or Johnson.