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The Musical History of the Jewish Community in Singapore

The Jewish community of Singapore, which from the beginning was primarily Iraqi-Sephardi in orientation, was created as a result of the British Crown Colony having been established there from the early 19th century. It grew as part of a network of families who had either fled oppression or wished to join other family members there and to better their prospects. Jewish cemeteries, street names, government records and oral communications testify to a network of other communities in the British colonies (such as Penang and Kuala Lumpur) as well as in cities in the Netherlands East Indies, including Jakarta (formerly Batavia), Bandung, Malang, Semarang and Surabaya, though these communities have now dispersed.

Thus, while some other Asian-Jewish communities date back as far as the second century of the Common Era or earlier, as in Kaifeng in China, the communities of Southeast Asia are more recent. Jewish traders from Egypt and other parts of West Asia had visited Southeast Asian ports such as Barus (on Sumatra's northwest coast) from at least the 13th century. However, the major movement of Jewish settlers to Southeast Asia, and with them their musical and liturgical traditions, began in the late 18th century with a Sephardi migration from Mesopotamia in the face of Muslim harassment of Arab-speaking Jews. Jewish settlers did not arrive in Singapore until the 1830s, after the British had established their colony there. The migration continued in subsequent decades: some migrants fled in the face of the oppressive regimes of certain Turkish *pashas* and *walis* [governors] while an influx of Ashkenazi Jews to the East, including Singapore, followed the first wave of pogroms in Russia and Russian-Poland from 1881. Others migrated there as part of the British financial and trading network stretching through India, Ceylon and elsewhere, just as other Jews migrated to the Netherlands East Indies to become financiers, traders and clerks in the web of Dutch colonies extending from South Africa to the Spice Islands. Jewish cultural and musical life flourished undisturbed in Singapore's supportive, multi-cultural society largely due to the remarkable tolerance of the predominantly Chinese host community. It experienced only limited change until the last fifteen years or so, the main musical, religious and life-style conflicts being between members of the community itself, not with the multicultural home community.

In 1830, nine male traders were identified among the island's population, constituting the first Jewish settlers in Singapore. One hundred years later, at its peak, the population of so-called Oriental or Iraqi Jews numbered 877 people (Ashkenazi Jews were classified as European nationals). From 1819, the governorship of Singapore's founder, Sir Stamford Raffles, allowed equal rights in matters of property ownership to both the colony's British subjects and its aliens and guaranteed freedom from religious interference to Muslims and also to Jews. Although excluded from membership of the European social clubs, the Iraqi Jewish population of Singapore enjoyed a

high degree of religious, social and commercial freedom in the local "climate of enterprise and hope."

The story of the development of sacred and secular music within the Iraqi-Sephardi community of Singapore is closely linked to social and historical events that affected the population as well as influential personalities who operated trading networks around the eastern and southeastern region. To illustrate the point, let us take the example of a single family's history. The father of current Melbourne resident Professor Joe Isaac was born in Baghdad in 1887 and emigrated, with his cousin, in 1907 at the age of 18 by sea and land in search of work. He arrived first in the Bombay community, where members of his family lived, then moved on to Calcutta. From there he sailed on to the community in Penang and settled temporarily in Singapore. Here the Sassoon family, which had the same Iraqi background as the two cousins, offered them work in their international business network, having become rich by trading contact with the Hong Kong branch of the family and through trade along the Old Silk Road. The Sassoons bore high respect for the Isaac family because their uncle, Ezekiel Manasseh (a cousin of Sir Manasseh Meyer, who became prominent in Singapore politics) had also set up trade in Singapore, after moving there from Calcutta. Such families as these gave employment to many immigrant Baghdadi Jews throughout the late 19th century and first two-thirds of the 20th century.

Joe Isaac was born in 1918 in Penang, where the thriving Jewish community had a synagogue and a cantor but no rabbi. As community leaders, including Joe's father, were well versed in religious and liturgical matters, the absence of a rabbi did not really matter. From 1922 to 1935, Joe and his family lived in Semarang, Java, where Joe's father ran religious services and educated the young people in Hebrew and the Jewish faith from his home, though there was a synagogue in lower Semarang and a cantor until 1941 when the Japanese invaded. Like all the communities in Southeast Asia, the one in Semarang resisted any changes in the liturgy, desiring to preserve the musical and ritual aspects of the tradition which the members believed to date back to ancient Babylon. The Semarang community – and others in the region – looked to Singapore for leadership in religious and liturgical matters when needed, for the Singapore community was always the strongest. In 1935, the Isaac family returned to Penang, taking a ferry boat to Singapore just after the War started in 1941 and finally moving permanently to Melbourne via Batavia (verbal communication from Professor Joe Isaac, 26 October 1998).

The musical history of the Jewish community of Singapore, from the beginnings in the 1830s to the present day, may be divided conveniently into five periods:

In the first period, from 1830 to 1878, the fledgling Singaporean British colonial society accepted some Jewish families, and liturgical and secular music was performed at first in their homes, though land was quickly secured by a 99-year lease for a small synagogue in 1841 and for a cemetery in Orchard Road in 1843.

A period of expansion and prosperity (for some) from the 1880s to World War II was initiated by the consecration of the Maghain Aboth Synagogue downtown in Waterloo Street on 4 April 1878. During this time, a second Sephardi synagogue, the Chasad El, was built by Sir Manasseh Meyer in 1905 in order to accommodate the

needs of people of different backgrounds and to resolve difficulties with language (as English began to replace Arabic as the main language of the community), order of service and ritual behaviour. Contemporary difficulties and disagreements over liturgical matters, behaviour and community morality find an historical echo in these earlier problems. Full-scale liturgical musical life was led by Arabic-speaking *hazans* (cantors) from Baghdad, who also performed the ritual services of *shohet* (authorised slaughterer of animals for food) and *mohel* (religious and medical circumcision officiant). A *minyan* (a quorum of at least ten devout men who attend daily prayers in the synagogue) was introduced, initially at the Chasad El and then at the Maghain Aboth, guaranteeing the stability of liturgical observance. Communal ceremonial life, including secular music and dance, flourished – though, until even as late as the 1930s, without the spiritual supervision of a rabbi.

A third period of temporary impoverishment occurred between 1943 and 1945, when 694 Baghdadi and other local Jews (including women and children) were interned (but not murdered) by the Japanese at the behest of visiting German Nazis. A significant wartime evacuation of Singapore Jews took place to Perth in Western Australia.

Following the end of the war, a period – the fourth – of reestablishment took place between 1946 and 1994, during which time liturgical and secular activity was fully restored, although numbers declined. By 1978 the membership of the Maghain Aboth synagogue had decreased from 1000 to 450 and in the late 1990s to about 300. The erosion of the community had in fact begun before the war with the increasing interest of the younger members in Western culture and their search for wider fields of opportunity than existed on the island.

A new era of challenge and change, the fifth period, was initiated by the appointment in 1994 of Rabbi Mordechai Abergel, a young Belgian-born and American-trained rabbi of Moroccan Sephardi background. He has led changes from the Iraqi-Sephardi performance tradition to a more elaborate (and, he hopes, appealing) Moroccan-Sephardi one. In this he has encountered some resistance (which he appears to be willing to meet and appease) from the more elderly members of the congregation, accustomed for over thirty years to the liturgical and musical leadership of the present *hazan*, Charlie Daniel (and before him, his father, Zion Daniel).

It is the main purpose of my present research to examine the 'old' Iraqi performance style of Charlie Daniel since the *hazan* has a key role in preserving the synagogal tradition.

The Babylonian Jewish community (as modern Iraqi Jews prefer to be called) is the oldest community in the diaspora. It was first established in 586 BC after the destruction of the first temple when the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar conquered Judea and deported the population to Babylon. When the Persian king Cyrus allowed the exiles to return to the land of Israel fifty years later, the majority decided to stay. Almost all the Jews of Iraq are descended from those brought as captives 2,500 years ago. Babylonian Jewry gave guidance and direction to Jewish life for 800 years, until the 11th century and had a powerful influence on the Sephardi tradition.

Despite the large-scale departures that resulted from repressive measures introduced under Turkish rule in the 18th and 19th centuries, the community in Iraq sustained a long, uninterrupted history until the escalation of Arab-Jewish hostilities that followed the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. In 1951, there was a mass exodus of Jews from Iraq. In an airlift known as "Operation Ezra and Nehemiah," all but a few left the country, mainly for Israel. In the levelling culture of modern Israel, the distinctive regional characteristics of Iraqi Jews began rapidly to disappear under the force of assimilation and acculturation to a pan-Sephardi style and a dominant Syrian influence.

Scholars such as Idelsohn (in Volume 2 of his 10-volume *Thesaurus of Oriental Hebrew Melodies*, published in 1923) and Shiloah (whose selection of *Piyyutim* and Songs of Iraqi Jews was published in 1983) have provided evidence of the rich musical traditions of the Baghdad community. These traditions were orally transmitted and have only been recorded and transcribed by musicologists since the 1920s. Contemporary pressures notwithstanding, Shiloah noted that the melodies remained remarkably stable over the sixty years between his collection and the pioneering work of Idelsohn. Idelsohn notes that while no Persian or Arabic influences can be found in the liturgical singing of Iraqi Jews, all non-synagogue music derives from its Arabic surroundings and is "relatively modern." Werner claims that a truly Jewish melos occurs in the core of strictly functional liturgy.

The Jewish community of Singapore believes that it has maintained the traditions, practices and musical "tunings" of its Iraqi heritage. The Rabbi is not the only force for change threatening the "old ways:" the community is aware that many Iraqi songs have been changed in Israel and that newcomers from Iraq itself are also changing the songs. Through the long continuity provided by the *hazan* Charlie Daniel and his father and teacher, it is possible to date the melodies in present use at least back to the 1920s, validating comparisons with Idelsohn's recordings. Thus the music of the Singapore community is of broad interest if only as a vestige of the vanishing practices, originally transplanted in the early nineteenth century, of Iraqi Jewry. Not much historical and little musicological work has been done on the music of the Oriental Jews, and the music of the Singapore community is not even mentioned in the literature (e. g. the literature survey included Werner's article on Jewish liturgical music in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 1980). Unfortunately, no recordings or transcriptions of the musical heritage of the Singapore community were made until the 1990s as the music was orally transmitted from generation to generation.

Although the secular music-making and dancing from Iraq has virtually disappeared within the present-day Singapore community, music still fulfills an important role in the two main areas of communal religious life: in the observance of the annual cycle of liturgical events (the celebration of *Shabbat* and the yearly holy-days) and in the ceremonies which mark key events in the life-cycle of individual members of the community. In the course of two field trips to Singapore in August 1995 and November 1996, we were able to record examples of daily services for dawn (*Shaharith* – prefaced by *slichot*) and evening *(Maariv)* and a *brit milah* (circumcision). In addition, the cantor, Charlie Daniel, allowed us to record a selection of some of the hun-

dreds of "old tunings and old songs" (to use his words) from Baghdad which he knows, including examples of *zemirot* (*Shabbat* songs sung in the home) and a wedding chant for the betrothal ceremony (Psalm 67). Religious observance proscribed recording on *Shabbat*, though we attended the service, my husband Dris sitting downstairs as an honorary Jew with the other men, myself upstairs in the women's gallery.

In order to situate the liturgical music of the Jewish community of Singapore firstly, within the context of the original nineteenth century Baghdadian heritage (insofar as this can be established) and secondly, within the broader framework of Sephardi practices generally, careful comparative work is called for. The recording, transcription and analysis of the recorded excerpts constitute the first stage of this work. What follows are three examples of *slichot* that were recorded at the dawn service at the Maghain Aboth Synagogue, Singapore, on Thursday 29 August 1995. The Singapore community uses *The Book of Prayer and Order of Service according to the Custom of Spanish and Portuguese Jews* based principally on the work of the Rev. D. A. de Sola. This replaced the old Baghdadian *Siddur* in the early years of the 20th century.

During the month of Ellul which culminates in *Rosh Hashanah* (Jewish New Year), special prayers of repentance known as *slichot* are said daily before the prayers for morning service in Sephardi congregations. At this time of year, it is also the custom to blow the *shofar* (ram's horn) daily. The first excerpt (Example 1) shows the cantor chanting and the rabbi playing the shofar simultaneously. In this example, the rabbi plays the three traditional *shofar* rhythms – *Tekiah, Shevarim, Teruah* in set sequences – and the fourth, the long version of the *Tekiah,* called *Tekiah g'dollah*, signals the end of the set. At the same time the cantor and congregation chant the prayer *Vaya'avor adonai*. There is no effort made to bring the pitches of the chanting and the *shofar* into a recognisable congruity. The *shofar*, the pitches of which are in any case highly variable and hard to control, cantillates around the tones B flat, B natural and C, producing microtones as well as semitones and harmonics up to a fourth, while the cantor sings *f#, e, d or d#*.

Shofar and chanting appear to be two compartmentalised unrelated events performed simultaneously. The *shofar* is not classified as a musical instrument but as an agent of ritual, and it is therefore not surprising to find chant proceeding with it. It does not matter whether it is played alone, or combined with other unrelated sounds or rituals, as it has a separate ritual purpose. The idea of independent musical lines – or of voices singing the same music at the same time but not in perfect unison – also characterised the chanting of prayers during the service.

The second excerpt (Example 2) shows the Cantor chanting and the *minyan's* response. As in orthodox Jewish tradition world-wide, liturgical singing consists of either solo or responsorial improvisation according to set rules, motifs and modes. A specific relationship has developed over the centuries between the words and the music.[1] The people traditionally came to value, despite the expected improvisational na-

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[1]   We are not speaking here of 'ta'amim mikra' – the oral tradition of trope that governs the reading of Torah, but of the prayers, psalms and other textual elements that make up the service.

ture of each rendition, the relatively fixed musical settings of the performance of stereotyped texts within the liturgy. The texts have not changed for 1600 years, but different traditions have different styles of performing the texts. In this example, we may compare the Singapore/Iraqi style of performing what is perhaps the most ubiquitous one-line prayer in Judaism, *Shema Israel*.

Vaya 'avor adonai

Recorded by H. and M. Kartomi, Singapore 1995.
Transcribed by B. Kornhauser.

Slichot cantor's chant and Rabbi's shofar playing

Text:
Vaya'avor adonai al-panav vayikra
Adonai Adonai el
rachum v'chanun erech apayim
v'rav-chesed v'emet
notzer chesed la' alafim noseh avon
vafeshah v'chata'at

Translation:
Our Lord, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abundant in kindness and truth. Preserver of kindness for thousands of generations; forgiver of iniquity, willful sin and error.
One who cleanses. May you forgive our iniquities and our errors and make us your heritage.

Example 1

Shema Israel

Slichot cantor's chant and minyan's responses.

Text:
Call: Shema Israel Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad.
Response: Same as call.
Call: Adonai hu ha'elohim. Adonai hu ha'elohim.
Response: Same as call.

Translation:
Call: Hear O Israel, The Lord is God, the Lord is one.
Response: Same as call.
Call: There is no other God.
Response: Same as call.

Example 2

The cantor's chant and *minyan's* response were in call and response form, and the chanting became more intense as the responsorial singing increased. The members of the *minyan*, standing in different parts of the synagogue sanctum, produced the same basic melody independently. The cantor very melismatically chanted to a tuning based

on the melodic unit *f#, e, d, c#* utilising the starter tones *c#, e, f#, e* and cadence tones (starting with the added note *a*): *f#, e, c#, e*.

Excerpt three (Example 3) depicts a unison song, *(Ra)chum v'chanun*. It is the first example in the service of deliberate unison singing by the entire congregation. The initial letter of each sentence of the text of this *piyyut* (interpolated poetic text) corresponds to the letter formation of the Hebrew alphabet (one of a number of conventional mnemonic aids which are also common to other traditions in Judaism). The melody comprises a varied repetition of 3 and 4-tone formulae. It is based on two overlapping tetrachords – *f, g, a flat, a natural, b flat* and *g, a flat, a natural, b flat, c* – but it is also motivic (e. g. motive 'a' is repeated at the beginning and the end). The metrical, but not perfectly unison singing of this melody was the highpoint in the *slichot* part of the service.

(Ra)chum v´chanun

Recorded by H. and M. Kartomi, Singapore 1995.
Transcribed by B. Kornhauser.

Slichot cantor´s call and minyan´s responses.

Call

Tam - nuh li zei - dim. Pa - chim u - metz - u - dim. U - va - chem nil - ka - dim. Pa´a mei ye - di - de - cha.

Response (outline)

Y´si - mun li metz - u - dim. V´she - ker mei - dim. Tsur. B´le´ de - cha.

Call

Ka - vo - d´cha ga - leh tsur. Le´ am az - uv v´a - tsur... ha´ ne tsur. Tna li - si - ri - de - cha.

Response

Lechutzim ~ b´rov do - chak Me - hem al t´chak. Ze - chor A - br´am I´l Is - rael - ´va - de - cha.

Call

Ma - rom mim - ´rim. Ra - chem al ´gu - mim. V´al - z´ra re - chu - mim. Ya [   ] Y´ li - dei y´di - de - cha.

Response

No´   a - kim   b´vor   ga - lut. V´ha - rem   mi - shi - flut. Cha - si - de - cha.

Translation: The enemies tried to trap us but they themselves were trapped. Without God's guidance I am lost. God looked after abundant nation; may he look after the survivors of that nation and do good for them. They are dejected ('squashed'); please do not abandon them. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel from above. Have pity on your suffering people and take them out of the depths of despair (exile).

Example 3

Conclusion

Musical analysis of the transplanted Iraqi-Sephardi *slichot* shows that the chant melodies are modal, generated by set melodic formulae, and are often based on one to three tetrachords, each of which vary between three and seven tones per octave, and with raised and lowered 2nds and 3rds. They often open with a three-tone formulaic starter phrase and end with a two- or three-tone cadential formula, using a variety of repetitive and sequential techniques. The music is monophonic, and in this case, syllabic; the melodic structure is governed by the text, and the melody moves within a restricted range; the tone scale is formed by a combination of small groups of notes; the organisation of the melody comprises short motifs which are repeated or a series of phrases of different lengths which are combined.

In a living, orally transmitted musical tradition, the different variations and modifications that occur in every performance of a melody are noteworthy, determined by the good taste, abilities, talents and circumstances of both performers and congregation. The cantor renders each variant of a chant phrase differently, and has a low vocal range and simple ornamentation. A comparison of the shofar's long-held tones and tongued repetitive-note passages based on set melodic formulae was also found stylistically to resemble those of the cantillation of the Torah. The melodies in present use date stylistically at least as far back as the early part of the twentieth century, validating comparisons with Idelsohn's phonogram recordings of that time which he transcribed and published. However, the resistance to change and lack of external influences until very recently indicate that the liturgical music has altered very little since it was introduced by the Singapore community a century and a half ago.

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