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## Theological Implications of the Symbols and Signs in the Sacrament of Matrimony of the Syro-Malabar Church

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NELSON MATHEW, O.CARM.

# Theological Implications of the Symbols and Signs in the Sacrament of Matrimony of the Syro-Malabar Church



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The universal Catholic Church, a communion of Latin and Oriental traditions, enshrines the immense riches of various theologies, spiritualities, liturgies, and Canon Law. Since the Second Vatican Council, Oriental traditions have received remarkable attention and widespread recognition that was long overdue. The acceptance of Eastern theology springs from the awareness that any theological reflection becomes full and perfect only when the Christian East is duly taken into consideration. This idea is echoed in the words of Pope John Paul II, who said in a speech to the members of the Roman Curia that “the Church needs to learn to breathe again with its two lungs—its Eastern one and its Western one.”<sup>1</sup> In the light of the last Ecumenical Council, there have been attempts to explore the richness of various Eastern theological reflections, spiritual practices, liturgical celebrations, cultural differences, practices, etc. It is in this regard that the religious practices, especially the symbols and rituals that are specific to the Sacrament of Marriage of the Syro-Malabar Church, an Oriental Church of apostolic origin, attract scholarly attention. Inspired by the traditional dictum, “*Lex Orandi, lex Credenti*,” this paper aims at bringing forth the rituals—symbols and signs—uniquely existing in the Sacrament of Matrimony of the Syro-Malabar Church, notable for its indigenous adaptations and adoptions, in view of demonstrating their cultural, spiritual, and theological value and implication.

Nowadays, we come to notice a wide chasm existing between the church’s teaching concerning marriage and the family and the lived convictions of many Christians. Many Catholics attach more importance to civil marriage, thereby compromising the meaning and significance of Catholic marriage and its symbols. The present generation seems to have grown disenchanted with the stability and sanctity of Christian marriage with many marriages breaking down due to extramarital relationships, verbal duels, psychological incompatibility, disharmony, abuse, bitterness, divorce, etc. There are young people who do not believe in life-long commitment through marriage and prefer only to live in commonlaw relationships. Christian marriage and its sanctity have come under unprecedented

1 John Paul II, “Discourse to the Members of the Roman Curia,” June 28, 1985. [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1985/june/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19850628\\_sacro-collegio.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1985/june/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19850628_sacro-collegio.html) (Accessed on 22 November 2021).

stress and strain hollowing out its relevance and significance. So, a rediscovery of the importance and richness of Christian marriage is of paramount importance. In this article, I concentrate on the symbols found in the marriage celebration of Syro-Malabar Christians and their meaning in the life of newly married couples.

## INCULTURATION AND PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL IN INDIA

The Catholic Church's life of worship and spirituality is broadened and deepened when it respects the culture and liturgical differences of the twenty-three Eastern Churches. St. Thomas Church in India, one of the 24 *sui iuris* churches in the Universal Church, has made significant contributions in the area of liturgy, faith, mission, and the proclamation of the Gospel. In India, the Catholic Church includes three rites: the Syro-Malabar, Syro-Malankara, and Latin churches. These three rites stand for a dynamic openness to all peoples and cultures with their different ways of expressing their faith and ritual practices. Inter-cultural adaptability is necessary to proclaim the gospel meaningfully all through India.

The Syro-Malabar Christians of Kerala, India, pride themselves on the gift of their Christian faith that was graciously received from St. Thomas, one of the disciples of Jesus. Founded by St. Thomas the Apostle in the first century AD, the St. Thomas church in India gradually emerged in the Indian soil, absorbing indigenous elements and developing into a Church, featuring unique characteristics.<sup>2</sup> St. Thomas Christians started to live incorporating the best elements from the socio-religious-cultural milieu. It is noteworthy that this tradition developed outside of the Roman empire and drew on the experience of St. Thomas, the apostle. The forefathers handed over this gift from generation to generation with its spirit and richness intact. According to Pauly Maniyattu, "the diversity of Christ's ex-

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2 Geroge Karakunnel, "Theology in the Life of the Syro-Malabar Church: A Search for Orientation," in *Syro-Malabar Theology in Context*, eds. Mathew Manakatt and Jose Puthenveetil (Kottayam: Paurastya Vidyāpīṭham, 2007), 39.

perience of the preaching and cultural background of the people who received the Gospel message accounted for different Churches and different modes of the celebration of faith and consequently different modes of the interpretation of faith.”<sup>3</sup>

The Syro-Malabar Church, one of the St. Thomas Churches, in its liturgical services and worship, has successfully adopted many elements from indigenous Hindu cultures that are found in absolute harmony with their Christian faith. In the words of Placid Podipara, the St. Thomas Christians are Hindus or Indians in culture, Christians in religion, and Syro-Oriental in worship.<sup>4</sup> The variety and diversity of symbols found in the Syro-Malabar rite show its beauty and splendor.<sup>5</sup> The faith for St. Thomas Christians was always lived and grasped as the “Way” given by the apostle (“*Mar Thoma Margam*”), not a set of doctrines. *Mar Thoma Margam* is the expression of the faith that Christians lived and practiced. According to Paul Pallath, “it contained the faith, liturgy, spiritual life, discipline, traditions, and customs, or in other words the ecclesial, socio-political and cultural *modus vivendi et agendi* of St. Thomas Christians.”<sup>6</sup> St. Thomas Christians lay great stress on tradition because the values of their ancestors are intertwined with present values and constitute an integral part of their contemporary consciousness.

Patristic literature, especially the literature of the Eastern fathers, plays a significant role in the religious formation and liturgical practices of the Eastern Churches. From the 4th to 15th centuries, Syro-Malabar Catholics followed the Syrian church in their liturgical celebrations. East Syrian liturgy originated and developed in Mesopotamia and Persia, and these places had enjoyed a cultural and commercial relationship with the Malabar coast from very ancient centuries. Eastern Christians honor traditions and customs that are considered sacred. Tradition

3 Pauly Maniyattu, “Source of the Syro-Malabar Theology,” in *Syro-Malabar Theology in Context*, eds. Mathew Manakattu and Jose Puthenveetil (Kottayam: Paurastya Vidyāpīṭham, 2007), 93.

4 Placid Podipara, “Hindu in Culture, Christian in Religion, Oriental in Worship,” in *St. Thomas Christian Encyclopaedia of India*, ed. George Menachery (Madras: B.N.K. Press, 1973), 109.

5 The Oriental Canon Law defines “a rite is a liturgical, theological, spiritual and disciplinary patrimony, culture and circumstance of the history of a distinct people, by which its own manner of living the faith is manifested in each Church *sui iuris*.” See *Codex Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium*, Canon 28 - §1.

6 Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India* (Rome: Mar Thoma Yoga, 2003), 63.

is understood not as a set of rigid outdated practices, but rather as “the church’s self-consciousness now of that which has been handed on to her, not as an inert treasure but as a dynamic inner life.”<sup>7</sup>

At several points in Church history, tension arose about inculturation, in particular about the leadership of the Church in India. For instance, from the 4th century onwards, the Persian bishops exercised the spiritual leadership of the Church, and they were traditionally known as the “Metropolitan and Door of all India.”<sup>8</sup> However, the effective administration of the Church was carried out by a native priest called the “Archdeacon of All India” or *Jathikkukarthavian*. Thus, Persian and Indian authorities collaborated in these early centuries. In later centuries, local leaders had to engage with leadership from the Latin church. With the arrival of the Western missionaries and with the Synod of Diamper in 1599, the identity of this church mingled with the Latin tradition. This has left a lasting impact on the liturgy and liturgical practices of St. Thomas Christians. However, the interactions between the Indian and Latin authorities were not always easy. The synod suspected the St. Thomas Christians of superstition and set itself against any sort of Indianization or integration of Christianity with Indian culture and any kind of religious tolerance.<sup>9</sup> The tensions continued when several protests were organized against Western missionaries, the most heroic being the Coonan Cross Oath in 1653. This resulted in the splitting of St. Thomas Christians in India into various denominations, which include those in communion and not in communion with the Catholic Church. The Syro-Malabar Church, which maintained unbroken communion with the Roman Catholic Church despite the Coonan Cross Oath, was led by Latin bishops.

7 John L. Roccasalvo, *The Eastern Catholic Churches: An Introduction to their Worship and Spirituality* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 15.

8 Francis Thonippara, “Mar Abraham: The Last Persian Metropolitan of the St. Thomas Christians,” in *India’s Christian Heritage*, eds. George Menachery and O.L. Snaitang (Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 2011), 128.

9 Jacob Vellian, “Syro-Malabar Liturgy Down the Centuries,” in *St. Thomas Christian Encyclopaedia of India*, ed. George Menachery (Madras B.N.K. Press, 1973), 117.

## LITURGICAL CELEBRATION OF MARRIAGE IN THE SYRO-MALABAR CHURCH AND CULTURAL ADAPTATION

Liturgy is a worship of the Church through Christ and it is the church's official proclamation of faith. For many, it looks to the future when God's reign will be definitively established. According to Abraham Mattam, "liturgy is the celebration of the Paschal Mystery of Christ by which Christ's salvific action is actualized and made present."<sup>10</sup> Vatican II repeats that liturgy is "an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ. In the liturgy, the sanctification of human beings is manifested by signs perceptible to the senses . . . In the liturgy, full public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and his members."<sup>11</sup> The term culture comes from the Latin word *cultura*, which means to cultivate or till. Culture is the formator of community values and it constitutes the lived experience of a particular community. Clifford Geertz states, "culture denotes a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions, expressed in symbolic forms by means of which human beings communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life."<sup>12</sup> The Indian culture has contributed greatly to the liturgical formation of the Syro-Malabar Church, particularly the signs and symbols associated with marriage.

The deposit of the Christian faith in India is expressed and experienced according to its cultural context. The Syro-Malabar liturgy incorporates both Hindu cultural elements and Christian theological elements in the rituals of marriage. In light of the Gospel, Syro-Malabar Christians adopted many things from the customs and culture of the marriage of their ancestors. They believe that marriage is a divine institution despite the many variations it may have undergone through the centuries in different cultures, social structures, and spiritual attitudes. Jacob Vellian states that the Syro-Malabar Church, one of the 24 *Sui Iuris* Churches of the Catho-

10 Abraham Mattam, *Forgotten East: Mission, Liturgy and Spirituality of the Eastern Churches* (Delhi: Ephrem Publications, 2001), 138.

11 Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium: Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*. AAS 56 (1964), 7.

12 Geertz Clifford, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (London: Basic Books, 1977), 89.



lic communions, utilizes the Chaldean or East Syrian liturgy with some Indian adaptations for its marriage ceremony.<sup>13</sup> Syro-Malabar Christians borrowed from several traditions such as indigenous people, East Syrians, Jews, and Portuguese.

India is known for a variety of religions, traditions, customs, and practices. In the Hindu religion, marriage is a solemn ceremony and is considered a life-long commitment. A close similarity is traceable between the St. Thomas Christians and high-caste Hindus in Kerala in the family life and social ceremonies, personal habits, and even religious observances. Marriage is the most important event in the life of the couple and it exerts a great influence on the structure and function of the family and human society in India. It is also believed that the marriage celebration plays an important role in the life of the couple because it is through the marriage liturgy that the basis of the Christian marital life is manifested and celebrated.

Syro-Malabar Christians believe that the liturgy of marriage is an authentic and communal response to God's call to family life. Rituals are part of a particular culture and it is not easy to separate rituals from culture. St. Thomas Christians' marriage rituals have undergone evolution through centuries and attained their present form. There are therefore many variations in the liturgy of matrimony among the Syro-Malabar, Syro-Malankara, and Knanaya communities of St. Thomas Christians in India. As a result of the destruction of historical documents during colonial rule, however, it is difficult to gain a full understanding of the early practices associated with the celebration of the Sacrament of Matrimony among the St. Thomas Christians.

According to the Hindu understanding of marriage in Kerala, marriage is a religious sacrament and a holy union of two souls. It is a celebration of love and life. It is an indissoluble bond that could be broken only by death. Catholics also absorbed this idea of marriage and family life. When Syro-Malabar Christians are married, they use both ceremonies that common as well as ceremonies particular to Christians. For Syro-Malabar Christians, marriage is a celebration of conjugal

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13 Jacob Vellian, *Crown, Veil, Cross: Marriage Rites* (Poona: Anita Printers, 1990), 21.

communion and love. It is not only communion between spouses, but also a communion with God and two families. The priest quotes a passage from the Gospel of Matthew to remind the couples of the indissolubility of marriage: “What God has joined together, let no one separate.” Just like Hindus, the Syro-Malabar Christians also followed the arranged marriage system.<sup>14</sup> They continued these customs probably from the time of their conversion from the Hindu religion. Although they lived in an environment of religious pluralism, Syro-Malabar Christians remained true to their own distinct identity. The two essential features of Hindu weddings *talikettal* and *Pudavakodukkal* are adopted by the Syrian Christians in Kerala.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF SIGNS AND SYMBOLS OF MARRIAGE IN THE SYRO-MALABAR CHURCH

Syro-Malabar Christians have adopted many signs and symbols of profound significance from different cultures, especially from Indian culture for their marriage celebration. Catholic marriage is a sacrament and covenant, more than just a social event, therefore signs and symbols are inevitable to reveal the hidden truth. Paulachan Kochappilly states that “marriage is a mystery in the sense that it is an actualization and manifestation of the divine love and life.”<sup>15</sup> The marriage liturgy is the celebration of revealed mysteries through signs and symbols.

The Hindu and Christian ceremonies of marriage have striking similarities. At the beginning of the Syro-Malabar marriage celebration, the couple holds their hands together and the priest blesses them both. It is a cultural adaptation from Hindu marriage called *pānigrahana*.<sup>16</sup> It is a sign of mutual acceptance, a symbol of their unity, and a sign of the indissolubility of marriage.<sup>17</sup> It also implies the couple’s

14 Arranged marriage means the parents would take the initiative in getting their children married once they are old enough. This system is slowly changing due to the influence of other cultures.

15 Paulachan Kochappilly, “The Covenantal Love and Life: Celebration of the Sacrament of Marriage,” *Ephrem’s Theological Journal* 7, no. 1 (October 2003), 171.

16 *Pānigrahana* is a Sanskrit compound consisting of the terms *pāṇi* and *grahaṇa*, which means taking or accepting of the hand.

17 Kochappilly, “The Covenantal Love and Life,” 187.

willingness to live as one body and one soul, and the husband's responsibility to protect his wife. When the priest blesses their hands with the sign of the cross, it shows that the Cross joins them together until the end of their lives. The pledge of marriage touching the Bible is another significant marriage symbol. The bride and the bridegroom place their right hands on the Bible, and as the celebrant prompts the pledge, the couple repeats the words after him. The Holy Bible symbolizes the words and commandments of God. Paulachan Kochappilly states "in touching the Bible and pronouncing the words of the marital pledge, the couple proclaims the faithfulness of God through their marriage."<sup>18</sup> The prayers in the marriage liturgy consist of numerous Old and New Testament references, such as Psalms, Song of Songs, and patristic imageries that bring the symbolic meaning of unity, love, equality, friendship, and complementarity of marriage life. These aspects of the ritual convey the theological, spiritual and liturgical meaning of marriage. *Tâli* and *mantrakôti* are the most significant signs of Syro-Malabar marriage.

## TÂLI AND MANTRAKÔTI IN HINDU CULTURE

The most important symbol of marriage for Hindus in Kerala, the stronghold of more Syro-Malabar Christians in India, is the tying of *tâli* or *mangalsutra*,<sup>19</sup> which is a practice among almost all communities in India. The ritual of *Tâli kettu*,<sup>20</sup> originally a Namboothiri ritual, was later adopted by all Hindus and Christians in Kerala. There were no homogeneous practices or traditions of tying the *mangalsutra* or *tâli* in different Hindu communities. Tying *tâli* around the neck of girls aged from nine to eleven was also a practice in the Brahmin community in Kerala. Later it was a custom practiced by both Brahmins and Nairs in Kerala but was not considered a real marriage. Now, tying the *tâli* implies the official recognition of man and woman as husband and wife in society. There were wide varieties of *tâli* used by various Hindu communities on the basis of caste. Generally, Hindus use

18 Kochappilly, "The Covenantal Love and Life," 191.

19 The word *Mangalsutra* is derived from two Sanskrit words: *mangal*, which means holy, and *sutra*, which means thread.

20 *Tâli kettu* means tying the *tâli* around the neck of the bride.



*Ela tâli*, where *ela* means leaf. Hindu's *tâli* is a tiny gold pendant, having the shape of the leaf of the banyan tree. According to Hilarion "the *tâli* which has the shape of the leaf of the banyan tree, sacred to the Hindus, is an adaptation of the *tâli* of the Brahmins, the high caste Hindus in Kerala."<sup>21</sup> In their *tâli*, there are 21 beads. Inscribed in the *tâli* of Hindus is either an "Om" (the letter that symbolizes the sacred sound) or the image of a particular Hindu god.<sup>22</sup>

A Hindu wedding also involves the exchange of *mantrakōti*. There was a custom in Kerala called *Sambandam*. A Nair woman could enter into cohabitation (live-in relationship) with men of Brahmins, the higher caste Hindu or even among Nairs, and this cohabitation was called *Sambandam*. According to this custom, the male gave a white *mundu* (cloth) to the woman in the Nair community. The acceptance of *mundu* was considered as permission to enter the woman's bedroom. This *mundu* given at the *Sambandam* came to be known as the *mantrakōti*. *Manthra* means blessed and *kodi* means new clothes. When a woman wanted to terminate the relationship with a man, the *mantrakōti* could be returned. Later, the conferring of the nuptial vestment (*mantrakōti/pudava kodukkal*) to the bride by the bridegroom is understood to be a vital part of marriage among Hindus in Kerala. This is a ritual in which the groom presents the bridegroom with the *pudava*, a traditional cloth (sari) worn by Kerala women. It is the symbol of the intimate union of life between the bride and bridegroom. The bridegroom gifts a traditional sari to the bride on a platter. This symbolic gesture marks that he would forever act as a provider for her.

## TÂLI AND MANTRAKŌTI IN SYRO-MALABAR MARRIAGE

The Syro-Malabar Church, one of the important Roman Catholic churches in Kerala, is known for its sacrament of marriage which employs a rich variety of signs and symbols judiciously adopted from their cultural milieu. The majority of these

21 J. Hilarion, "The Sacrament of the Malabar Church before 1400 A.D.," in *The Thomapedia*, ed. George Menachery (Thiruvananthapuram: St. Thomas Press, 2000), 116.

22 Pauly Maniyattu, "Inculturation of the East Syrian Liturgy of Marriage by the St. Thomas Christians in India, in *Studies on the Liturgies of the Christian East: Selected Papers of the Third International Congress of the Society of Oriental Liturgy*, eds. S. Alexopoulos and B. Groen, (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2013), 170.



rituals were passed down to Syro-Malabar Christians from their Hindu ancestors. Thomas Kochumuttam says that “until the Synod of Diamper, there was no practical difference between the Christians and Hindus in dress and ornaments, with the exception that the Christians wore as their distinguishing mark a metal cross in the tuft of hair, or, in the case of women, a cross of twenty-one-minute beads on the gold ornament called *tâli* or *minnu* has worn by the married women.”<sup>23</sup> The signs and symbols used in Syro-Malabar marriages are capable of touching and enlightening the hearts and minds of the faithful. There are mainly three sacred and permanent symbols in Syro-Malabar marriage rites such as *tâli* or *minnu*,<sup>24</sup> *mantrakôti*, and wedding ring. The couples are responsible for their upkeep throughout their life, especially *tâli/minnu*. *Tâli* and *mantrakôti* symbolize the sacramentality, covenant, and love-relationship of marriage. In the Syro-Malabar Church, the priest has an important role in the blessing of *tâli*, *mantrakôti*, and ring. The *tâli* and *mantrakôti*, having been blessed by the priest and sprinkled with holy water are handed over to the bridegroom. Francis Eluvathingal states, “the most important rites found exclusively in the marriage celebration of St. Thomas Christians are the tying of the *tâli/minnu* and offering of the *mantrakôti*. These two are found among the customs of the Hindus and indeed remain strong examples of inculturation by the Christians in India.”<sup>25</sup> Then bridegroom ties the *tâli/minnu* around the neck of the bride and places the *mantrakôti* on the head of the bride. In terms of rituals, the popular meaning of marriage is tying *tâli* around the neck of the bride, and in the local language, it is called *pennukettu*. Marriage itself is called *kettukalyanam* and the bridegroom is known in the vernacular language (Malayalam) as *tâli/minnu kettiyarvan*. The *tâli* hanging on the neck of a bride signifies that she is a married woman. It should not be constructed as the bridegroom

23 Thomas Kochumuttam, “The Scope and Essentials of an Indian Theology,” in *The St. Thomas Christian Encyclopaedia of India* 3, ed. George Menachery (Madras: B.N.K. Press, 1973), 95.

24 *Minnu* and *tâli* are interchangeably used by the Christians in Kerala.

25 Francis Eluvathingal, “Family Tradition and Identity of St. Thomas Catholics: Paper Prepared for the Eparchial Assembly, Kalyan,” June 7, 2017. [https://kalyancatechism.in/catechism/lesson18/IDENTITY\\_AND\\_TRADITIONS\\_OF\\_ST\\_THOMAS\\_CATHOLIC\\_FAMILIES\\_Final\\_Paper.pdf](https://kalyancatechism.in/catechism/lesson18/IDENTITY_AND_TRADITIONS_OF_ST_THOMAS_CATHOLIC_FAMILIES_Final_Paper.pdf) (Accessed 12 January 2022).



enslaving the bride despite the fact that a patriarchal society is likely to ascribe such meaning or interpretation.<sup>26</sup> In the mind of the Church tying the *tâli* refers to *sharwtaputha* or communion.

There are so many interesting ceremonies related to the preparation of the thread to be used for *tâli*. On the eve of the marriage, the twine with which the *tâli* is tied is prepared in the house of the bridegroom. Usually, threads are taken from the wedding garment, the *mantrakôti*. Both Brahmins and St. Thomas Christians shared the same tradition of the formation of this thread. The final cord was prepared by twisting three threads into one and out of seven such composite strands. For Christians, three may represent the Holy Trinity, and seven may stand for the seven sacraments or seven days. After the marriage celebration, this *tâli* is hooked in a golden chain called *talimala*. The bride wears it forever to signify permanent commitment and loyalty to the marriage. The couple gives great spiritual significance to the *tâli*. It is removed only after the death of the bride, just before the burial. When she dies, it is either interred with her body or deposited in the treasury box of the parish church.<sup>27</sup>

The *mantrakôti* is the nuptial vestment for the bride presented in the church by the bridegroom which is very biblical. Syro-Malabar Christians view the conferring of nuptial vestments on the bride by the bridegroom as an important wedding ritual. They seem to have adapted this Hindu custom of *Pudavakodukkal*. The Christian rite of *mantrakôti* is indeed another example of inculturation. Syro-Malabar Christians have the rite of the blessing of this nuptial vestment. Jesus in his parables of the wedding feast insisted on the wedding dress for entering God's kingdom. According to Francis Eluvathingal, "East Syrian tradition has the rite of blessing of nuptial vestment indicating that the bride is adorned with her bridal robes of grace and blessing."<sup>28</sup> The husband is to protect the wife as

26 Maniyattu, "Inculturation of the East Syrian Liturgy of Marriage by the St. Thomas Christians in India," 171.

27 Maniyattu, "Inculturation of the East Syrian Liturgy of Marriage by the St. Thomas Christians in India," 171.

28 Eluvathingal, "Family Tradition and Identity of St. Thomas Catholics," 14.

Christ protects the Church. St. Paul reiterates on several occasions that Christ is the groom and the Church is his bride. It is a symbol of communion between the bride and bridegroom. To vest someone shows the intimacy between the persons.

## THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF TÂLI/MINNU

The Catholic Church recognizes the richness of eastern theology which is known to be more biblical, patristic, liturgical, and mystical. The liturgical signs and symbols are derived from a theology that draws on Sacred Scripture and traditions of Eastern Fathers. Scripture is powerfully presented and authentically interpreted through liturgical signs and symbols of marriage. It is from the sacred Scriptures that the prayers for marriage are collected and the meaning of these signs and symbols derived. The marriage liturgy embodies the faith, the theology of the church, and the experience of the people. Jacob Vellian opines, “the concept of the wedding of Christ with the Church is illustrated very well in the East Syrian Liturgy, especially in the liturgical seasons of Epiphany and Dedication of the Church, as well as in the Sacrament of Marriage.”<sup>29</sup> The Catholic Church considers marriage as a sacrament, covenant, and lifelong commitment. *Berith*, the Hebrew word for covenant, which originated from Akkadian, also was used in the sense of binding. Its Malayalam equivalent is *kettuka*, which emphasizes this covenantal nature where the spouses are bound by the mystery of Christ.<sup>30</sup> It is not only a physical union of woman and man but is a vocation to live a life of love as well.

Marriage is the divine plan of God from the beginning of humanity. The signs and symbols used in the marriage liturgy exemplify Christ’s salvific life, Trinitarian life, and ecclesial life. Marriage is a covenant and it incorporates the couple into the body of Christ. The bride and bridegroom who participate in the liturgy of marriage are empowered to see their partner as a gift of God and they surrender their life completely to God. The marriage celebration helps the couples to love each other, deny themselves, to accept, enjoy, share, thank, and admire each other.

29 Vellian, *Crown, Veil, Cross: Marriage Rites*, 12.

30 Koikara Mathew, *The Sacredness of Marriage and Family in the Cultural Milieu of St. Thomas Christians* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2018), 6-7.



It directs and shapes their personal commitment to God and each other. Marriage is for lifelong companionship, support, and comfort to each other, both in prosperity and adversity, only then it can bring peace, joy, and togetherness. The tying of the *tâli/minnu* is a sign of the indissolubility of marriage as well as a sign of fidelity. Marriage may be seen more like a covenant between the spouses and God, rather than the spouses themselves. Syro-Malabar Christian tradition also recognizes the mystical aspect of marriage. It is the union of not only two bodies but also two souls since marriage symbolizes the mystic union of Christ with his Church. Syro-Malabar Christians fashion the *tâli/minnu* after the shape of a heart. The heart symbolizes the concept of love. Christ loved the Church and gave himself for the Church, so ought a husband to love his wife as his own body. “As the union of Christ with the Church cannot be shaken, so the union or bond between the husband and wife is indissoluble. There is no cause, that can justly, no power upon earth that can authorize the breaking of a legal and a true marriage bond between Christians after the marriage has been consummated.”<sup>31</sup>

The symbols used in the marriage reminds the couples of the presence of God in their life. *Tâli* is the most important symbol of the covenant and it symbolizes the commitment that the spouses undertake through the sacrament of marriage to become one. Traditionally, the Catholic’s *tâli/minnu* is a small gold medal with the sign of the cross on it and there are 21 golden beads. *Tâli* is attached to a code made of 21 strands drawn from the *mantrakōti* (wedding cloth) and entwined in seven sets of three each.<sup>32</sup> The groom ties the *tâli/minnu* around the neck of the bride after being blessed by the priests. It is a symbol of mutual ownership. It signifies that God binds man and woman together. By tying the *tâli/minnu* on the neck of the bride, the bridegroom unites the wife to himself and makes a pledge of love to her forever. Syro-Malabar marriage rite attaches a great spiritual significance to the *tâli/minnu*.

31 Ayyar, L. K. Ananthakrishna, *Anthropology of the Syrian Christian* (Ernakulam: Cochin Government Press, 1926), 100.

32 Podipara, “Hindu in Culture, Christian in Religion, and Oriental in Worship,” 111.



The Cross in the center of *tâli* symbolizes the love of Jesus towards his Church and his beloved spouses. Moreover, it signifies Christ is the center of their union and whole life. It reminds the spouses to follow the selfless love of Jesus Christ in their spousal life. Christ facilitates their communion, and he is the mediator, as well as the source of joy, happiness, protector, etc. Due to the presence of Jesus and his first miracle recorded in the Gospel of John, the spouses at Cana were made happy. The cross reminds the spouses that problems may arise in their married life and that Christ will come to their rescue in the moments of their helplessness. The cross also invites the spouses to participate in the Christ or Salvific event through their spousal life. Through the Cross and resurrection of Jesus, the Church in this world is being protected and being moved to the heavenly Father. The couples also participate in salvific acts of Christ as family and the cross becomes a shield of their life. It also reminds their relationship with Jesus who is the foundation of their marital life. It also strengthens them to encounter the difficulties of their life with composure and equanimity. The Cross is also a sign of peace, victory, divinity, and redemption. Marriage is the vocation of the couple to live a life of self-sacrifice and a covenantal relationship with Christ. When a man and a woman are united in Jesus through marriage, they are invited to the Christological pattern of dying and rising with him. Jesus' mediation in the covenant of marriage transforms and enables the couple to mark a new beginning by which they physically and spiritually participate in the redemptive nature of Christ's own life. Such a consciousness of union in Christ calls the couple to a relationship that is permanent and everlasting.<sup>33</sup>

The Syro-Malabar liturgy emphasizes the work of God in the celebration of marriage and the rest of their family life. The twenty-one beads on the *tâli* signify the Trinity and seven sacraments (21=3×7). Trinity is the most important symbol of union and love. The blessing of the *tâli*, *mantrakôti*, rings, and spouses in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit indicates the presence of the Holy Trinity in the celebration of marriage and their daily life. The Trinitarian dimension of *tâli* enables the couples to foresee their vocation that is to practice

33 Koikara, *The Sacredness of Marriage and Family*, 45.

communion and sharing as occurring among the three persons in the Trinity. The Trinitarian God enables the couple to love and accept each other joyfully throughout their lives. Marriage is a sacrament and it cannot be abrogated. The *tâli/minnu* is put on seven strands of thread from the *mantrakôti*. These seven stands for the seven sacraments of the Church. Sacraments are the most intimate encounters of human beings with God and play a pivotal role in the growth and spiritual development of a Christian community. Mathew Koikara states that “the Holy Spirit who is poured out in the sacramental celebration offers Christian couples the gift of a new communion of love that is the living and real image of that unique unity which makes of the Church the indivisible Mystical Body of the Lord Jesus.”<sup>34</sup> Koikara again points out that it is believed that the thread symbolizes the Holy Spirit who unites the spouses together. The thread along with the *minnu* around the neck takes a circular shape that indicates the continuous activity and everlasting presence of the Holy Spirit in marital life.<sup>35</sup>

Marriage fulfils God’s purpose in creation through the spiritual and sexual union of man and woman. The symbols of this sacrament remind the couples of the grace they have received through it. Syro-Malabar Christians pursue the culture of arranged marriage. In this culture bride and bridegroom need not be people who know each other personally for a long time. In many cases, they come to know each other casually during the so-called course of looking out for the bride and bridegroom.<sup>36</sup> This leaves little scope for intimate and long-standing familiarity with each other. The couples simply trust each and believe that their marriage is willed by God. They consider it as a sacramental relationship between God and spouses.

34 John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio: Apostolic Exhortation on the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World*. AAS 74 (1982), 19.

35 Koikara, *The Sacredness of Marriage and Family*, 8-9.

36 Maniyattu, “Inculturation of the East Syrian Liturgy of Marriage by the St. Thomas Christians in India,” 172.

## THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF MANTRAKŌTI

In the Syro-Malabar marriage ceremony, the bride wears a white dress when she appears for the marriage ceremony. It carries two-fold implications according to the tradition. White is a symbol of the bride's purity in heart and her entire life. It also symbolizes the righteousness of Christ described in Revelation 19:7–8 with regard to the wedding of the lamb. Christ clothes his bride, the church, in his own righteousness as a garment of fine linen, bright and clean. According to Valuparampil Kurian, the "bridal robe [is] also a symbol of the magnificent robe of glory which Christ the bridegroom put on His bride and adorned her with."<sup>37</sup> Adorning the bride with *mantrakōti* in the Syro-Malabar marriage is understood as the couple putting on Christ in their life. It is the nuptial garment with which the bridegroom covers the head of the bride. Luis Edakalathur says, "the nuptial garment (*mantrakōti*) with which the groom clothes the bride is a symbolic gesture of his commitment to look after her."<sup>38</sup> By accepting the *mantrakōti*, the bride expresses her willingness to share her life with him. *Mantrakōti* is placed over the head of the bride. This symbolizes the protection and cares the bridegroom promises to the bride. "The wedding garment is the sign of glory that hovers the couple throughout their marital life. This illustrates that the marriage bond is pure, honorable, and holy."<sup>39</sup> It also symbolizes their mutual dedication and commitment in all aspects of their life. It also symbolizes their internal beauty and God-given dignity in the spousal relationship, and the marital fidelity and chastity which they have to keep till the end of their life. After the marriage ceremony in the church, the bride wears the *mantrakōti*, which also symbolizes the new life that begins through this sacrament.

37 Valuparampil Kurian, "The Theology and Spirituality of Holy Matrimony," *Christian Orient* 11 no. 1 (1990): 141.

38 Edakalathur Luis, *The Theology of Marriage in the East Syrian Tradition* (Rome: Mar Thoma Yogam Publications, 1994), 179.

39 Kochappilly, "The Covenantal Love and Life," 189.



## THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE WEDDING RING

The wedding ring is the symbol of the covenant which is now a universal symbol. Podipara opines that earlier no wedding ring was used in the marriage of St. Thomas Christians.<sup>40</sup> The wedding ring appears to have been introduced within Jewish culture and was borrowed by the Romans. According to Roman and Jewish culture, the ring was the symbol of authority, dignity, and social status. For the Syrian Christians, the exchange of wedding rings was only part of the betrothal. But now it is a custom for Syro-Malabar couples to exchange rings in marriage as a pledge of mutual fidelity, as a token of love, faith, and covenant relationship. Paulachan Kochappilly says “it reminds the bridegroom and the bride of their covenant promises and the consequent duties and responsibilities towards each other before the Lord and the Church.”<sup>41</sup> The rings have the names of the other partner engraved on them, indicating a strong bond between partners. The wedding ring is a mark, a reminder, and an identification that shows that he or she belongs to a particular person. In the Book of Genesis, Pharaoh gave his signet ring to Joseph as a symbol of authority. Upon his return, the prodigal son received a ring from his father as a symbol of dignity and authority. For the Syro-Malabar couple, the wedding ring is evidence of modesty and a symbol of a sacred vow to one’s partner for a long and lasting relationship until death. It is a sign of mutual love and faithfulness in the model of Christ and the Church. The rings also symbolize fidelity and unending love.<sup>42</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The proclamation of the Kingdom of God entails inculturation. To spread the gospel in the heterogeneous cultural soil of India the Church needs to be open to inter-cultural adaptation. The Gospel must borrow elements from Indian cultures to build up the kingdom of God. Dialogue between the Church and Indian culture has assumed vital importance for the future of the Church in India. Syro-

40 Podipara, “Hindu in Culture, Christian in Religion, Oriental in Worship,” 84.

41 Kochappilly, “The Covenantal Love and Life,” 189.

42 Donal O’Sullivan, “The Marriage Liturgy,” *The Furrow* 7 (1956): 69.



Malabar Catholics are very much enculturated in Indian soil—so much so that their religious rituals stand interlinked with the Indian culture. As a matter of fact, rituals of all religions are derived from culture. We cannot envisage a total separation between rituals and culture. Catholics should learn to treat each other as brothers and sisters, to respect and understand each culture so that they may survive and may grow in dignity, liberty, and honor. Prejudices, cultural barriers, racial discrimination, and religious and ideological separations are great threats to Christian evangelization. The Christians belonging to the Syro-Malabar rite testify to the beauty and merit of inculturation of the Christian faith. The Christian rites of *tâli* and *mantrakôti* are indeed examples of inculturation by the Syro-Malabar Christians. It is worth mentioning that the St. Thomas Christians did not simply copy the Indian customs; rather they Christianised them in the form of signs and symbols and used them as Christian symbols. The signs and symbols used in the sacrament of marriage empower the couples to live through the rich biblical, liturgical, theological, and spiritual traditions proper to the Syro-Malabar church.

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