

4 FADING MEMORIES AND LINGUISTIC FOSSILS IN THE RELIGIOLECT OF KERALA JEWS

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Introduction

Jewish presence on the West Coast of South India is documented back to the ninth century CE, when the dialects of South-Dravidian assumed their distinctive features marking the beginning of the Malayalam language (Ayyar 1993: 18–9; Sekhar 1951; Krishnamurti 2003: 2). The oldest Jewish compositions in Malayalam are comparable in language and style with Old Malayalam literature and, therefore, predate the fifteenth century (Gamliel 2015: 509). In 1954, Malayalam speaking Jews migrated *en masse* to Israel, gradually giving way to Modern Hebrew. Like other Jewish communities with such a long history, Kerala Jews also developed their own distinctively Jewish dialect or, more accurately, religiolect (Gamliel 2009). Presently, Jewish Malayalam is in a moribund stage with less than 500 speakers in varying degrees of fluency. The chapter describes the documentation of this fading religiolect.

Section 1 discusses the term religiolect and the position of Jewish Malayalam on the spectrum of Jewish languages. Section 2 explains the motives for implementing the approach of language documentation (Himmelman 1998; Gippert, Himmelman and Mosel 2006; Messineo 2008; Austin 2014, 2015). Section 3 utilizes historical linguistics based on the audio database of Jewish Malayalam. Section 4 draws upon the database for the study of Kerala Jewish oral history. Finally, Section 5 concludes with the implications of the study of religiolects for the history of religious minorities with Jewish Malayalam as a case study.

Jewish Languages and Religiolects at a Glance

The term “Jewish languages” is based on the definition of languages on religious grounds rather than on structural linguistics. As such, the attribute “Jewish” better fits a dialect or, at best, a language variety. Benjamin Hary (2009: 11–12) defines Jewish languages as religiolects based on their marked religious affiliation with a different linguistic substratum of sacred texts. Seen from this perspective, Jewish languages belong to a broader field of religiolects, namely minority dialects that evolved out of contact between the liturgical language of the minority group and the spoken language of the majority, which may vary greatly in their structure and genealogy. How-

ever, as a research field, the study of Jewish languages is unparalleled by a research field concerning for instance Muslim languages in Southeast Asia or Christian languages in the Arab-speaking world that may very well fit the characteristics of dialects differentiated from the majority language by their religious affiliation (Hary and Wein 2013).

The term “religiolect” is a late-comer in the field of Jewish languages. While the study of Jewish languages like Yiddish, Ladino and Judeo-Arabic was already established in the late-nineteenth century, the linguistic analysis of a dialect or a language variety as “Jewish” remains somewhat evasive, oscillating between two contrasting approaches. On the one hand, there is the tendency to view Jewish languages as a sub-category within a broader field of language variation (Rabin 1981). On the other hand, there is a tendency to view Jewish languages as a unique phenomenon related to centuries-long exile, gradually distanced and scattered from a common language substratum, namely Hebrew (Wexler 1981).¹ The term “religiolect” is useful in anchoring the study of Jewish languages in a broader field of religiously-defined language varieties inherently related to dialectology, sociolinguistics and languages in contact. Thus, beyond the confinement of Jewish religiolects to Jewish Studies lies a wide array of religiously-defined language varieties.

The four criteria for defining a Jewish language were first set by Moshe Bar-Asher (2002):

- a. Jewish languages are written in the Hebrew script
- b. The linguistic tradition contains verbatim translations of sacred texts
- c. Hebrew phrases are used as idioms in casual speech
- d. Archaic features of the host language are retained

Benjamin Hary (2009: 19–25) adds six criteria to the above, extending the range of the definition “Jewish language” to even include other Jewish languages that do not neatly fit into the paradigm set by Bar-Asher. Thus, even though Jewish Malayalam is mostly conveyed by the Malayalam script, it shows the other three major features as well as much of what Hary considers as defining criteria for a Jewish language (Gamliel 2009; Rubin and Kahn 2015: 3).²

Among the better-known Jewish languages are Yiddish, Ladino and Judeo-Arabic; each is affiliated with a different language family: Slavo-Germanic (Kahn 2015), Romance (Bunis 2015) and Central-Semitic respectively (Khan 2015). Jewish

1 Chaim Rabin (1981) suggests the analytic framework of diglossia, where Biblical and Classical Hebrew serve as the “upper” register and the colloquial spoken languages (e.g. Yiddish) serve as the “lower” register. Paul Wexler (1981), on the other hand, suggests the framework of historical analysis attributing Hebrew the status of a common substratum that was diffused into Diaspora languages through a process of shifts.

2 The Hebrew script was used to represent Malayalam words in a limited way in Hebrew documents such as prayer books or marriage-contracts (*ketubah*).

Malayalam is exceptional in its affiliation with the Indian linguistic area, though there are speculations on other Indian-Jewish religiolects (Wexler 1981: 113; Rubin and Kahn 2015: 750). It should be stressed that besides Jewish Malayalam there is no other Indian-Jewish religiolect with a community of speakers whose literature predates the sixteenth century. The contacts between Jews using the Hebrew script and Malayalam speakers were already attested for the ninth century, with signatures in Judeo-Persian found in a royal inscription granting land and privileges to West Asian traders. This Old Malayalam inscription is engraved on copper plates and dated to 849 CE (Narayanan 1972: 31–37; Varier and Veluthat 2013: 113). Moreover, the contacts of Jews with the Malayalam-speaking region are amply attested in Judeo-Arabic letters exchanged between South India, Aden and Egypt between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries.³

In 1954, when Kerala Jews migrated *en masse* to Israel, there were approximately 3 000 Malayalam-speaking Jews, with a few hundred community members left behind. A second wave of migration occurred in the 1970s, leaving behind less than 100 community members. The Jews arriving in the 1970s had their speech standardized by the educational system in Modern Kerala, where the literacy rates are currently nearing 94% according to the 2011 Census of India. In contrast to this, the earlier migrants did not enjoy the educational reforms in Kerala, so that by the 1970s their speech was judged as outdated and incorrect by the later migrants. Even today, when asked about their language, Jewish Malayalam speakers define their language as old (*paṣaya*) or broken (*mefubefet*), often with a sense of embarrassment. It was only in 2008 that the Malayalam spoken by Kerala Jews in Israel was recognized by scholars as a Jewish language variety (Gamliel 2009, 2014).

Remarkably, even some six decades after the detachment from the Malayalam-speaking region in South India, Kerala Jews in Israel still use their religiolect, although fluent speakers are mostly in their sixties and older. The reason may be related to their settlement patterns in the newly-founded state of Israel in the 1950s. Kerala Jews were relegated to agrarian settlements in the border regions and, as a consequence, maintained close communal life and familial relations. Contemporary Jewish Malayalam speakers often attribute their knowledge of Malayalam to their grandparents, who retained the use of Malayalam in the domestic environment many years after the mass migration. Under these circumstances, the Jewish religiolect of Kerala is still maintained by speakers and available for documentation, description and analysis.

3 For the Judeo-Arabic letters related to the Indian Ocean trade, see Goitein and Friedman 2008.

Better Late Than Never: Documenting Jewish Malayalam

Kerala Jews have been the subject of anthropological research and historical study since the 1930s (Mandelbaum 1939; Fischel 1967; Johnson 1975; Walerstein 1987), but it was not until the 2000s that the linguistic heritage of Malayalam-speaking Jews was put in the spotlight. This indifference towards the linguistic heritage of the community stands in stark contrast to the curiosity of Jewish scholars towards this “esoteric” community, ostensibly isolated and having its origins shrouded in mystery. Notwithstanding the scarcity of premodern sources related to the history of Kerala Jews, their origins are traceable to the ninth century in relation to the medieval Indian Ocean trade routes.⁴ With such a long history of Jews in the Malayalam-speaking region, it is plausible to assume that a distinctive Jewish religiolect evolved. Nevertheless, Jewish Malayalam remained for a long time a subject for mere speculation. The early 2000s constituted the last moment for salvaging something of the fading linguistic heritage of the community before it is too late.

The first attempt at studying the linguistic heritage of the community was related to hand-written manuscripts containing Jewish wedding songs in the Malayalam script (Johnson 2002). Occasional attempts at translating the Jewish Malayalam songs over the years did not mature into a fully-fledged linguistic description. Thus, all interviews and recordings of community members were conducted either in English or in Hebrew avoiding the challenges involved in translations from Malayalam, an under-researched language, let alone a dialect of Malayalam on the verge of extinction. It was only in 2002 that a scholar of Malayalam language and literature, Scaria Zacharia, was first introduced to the field. He made some public speeches in Malayalam in front of community members in Israel, and received an enthusiastic response. Zacharia began to promote the research and publication of Kerala Jewish literature for rendering the nearly forgotten literary corpus accessible to community members in both Malayalam and Hebrew (Zacharia and Gamliel 2005). However, Zacharia was under the impression that Jewish Malayalam was not a distinct Jewish language as, say, Yiddish or Ladino,⁵ possibly because the elderly women and men who migrated in 1954 felt embarrassed to expose their “broken” Malayalam to the venerable scholar.

In 2007, after nearly four years of studying spoken Malayalam in Central Kerala, I moved to Mesilat Zion, an agrarian settlement of Malayalam-speaking Jews near Jerusalem. My elderly neighbors were happy to engage in casual Malayalam conversations, but conversing with them was frustratingly difficult. It was not long before I realized that they speak a non-standard Malayalam variety very different from the one I was familiar with from Central Kerala. Firstly, their Malayalam was outdated in relation to contemporary Kerala dialects. Secondly, it was spiced up with lexical borrowings from Modern Hebrew. Thirdly, it depicted features of a Jewish religiolect which

4 For further discussion on the topic see Gamliel 2013b.

5 Personal communication.

likely predates the migration to Israel. Above all, it became evident that whatever language or dialect Malayalam-speaking Jews in Israel were using, it was in the process of fading away, along with stories, jokes, proverbs, idioms and invaluable ethnographic data that had been left out of the scope of studies on Kerala Jewish history and culture.

Considering the urgency in salvaging whatever is left of the linguistic heritage of Jewish Malayalam, I began documenting casual speech following the principles of language documentation as elaborated by Gippert et al. (2006). At the time, there were already several projects—some completed and some in progress—that focused on Kerala Jews in Israel. None of the projects, however, had anything to do with Malayalam. On the contrary—the interviewers were reluctant to conduct an interview in Malayalam even though many of them were Malayalam speakers themselves. Moreover, the prospects of fieldwork were narrowed down to personal memoirs captured on tape by well-intentioned field workers with no technical training in digital recording, archiving and cataloguing.

The initiative for the language documentation project emerged out of the community in an almost arbitrary manner. One of my neighbors in Mesilat Zion asked me whether I would be willing to teach the Malayalam script to Malayalam speakers living in the area. Thus, the project began even before it was officially launched and before any institution offered support. We started a “class” composed of Malayalam speakers in their sixties and above. Everybody was enthusiastic and excited about the opportunity to discuss Malayalam and exchange jokes, stories, anecdotes, etc. I brought in a small and almost unnoticeable digital recorder and began to take notes, archive and catalogue all that was going on in the “Malayalam class”. Even though the attempt to teach the Malayalam script was futile, the meetings of the Malayalam “class” turned out to be a language revival group.

In fact, the Jewish Malayalam documentation project emerged out of this group, which provided the essential initial findings behind the argument that Kerala Jews developed their own distinctive Jewish religiolect. The group meetings further served as a platform for recruiting language workers and for campaigning for a broader scale of language documentation within the community and beyond. In collaboration with Jarmo Forsström, a phonetician studying the traditional Hebrew pronunciation of Kerala Jews (Forsström 1997), I applied for funds for the Jewish Malayalam language documentation project. Thus, under the auspices of the Ben-Zvi Institute, the Jewish Malayalam language documentation project was launched in 2008.

Even though the budget was relatively small, the enthusiastic support of several dedicated community members enabled us to collect, archive and catalogue approximately forty gigabytes of digital records, mostly of audio files. Our budget was spent mainly on travel around the country for interviewing elderly community members; except for a high quality digital recorder and a laptop for one language worker, we could not afford more sophisticated tools such as a video camera or video editing programs. Above all, the Jewish Malayalam documentation project could not complete

the required tedious work of transcriptions and translations due to the lack of further institutional support in training documentary linguists.⁶

The project was launched with two aims in mind. Firstly, there was the need to establish a corpus of Jewish Malayalam oral literary forms and linguistic data. Secondly, we sought to enrich the repertoire of Hebrew recital traditions for Forsström's research. The method for interviewing was divided between meetings with individuals or couples in their homes, and recordings of community events or group meetings. This fourfold strategy of documentation is reflected in the catalogue of the audio records. Audio files containing Hebrew recitals are catalogued as A for communal events and B for individual interviews. Audio files containing Jewish Malayalam speech are catalogued as C for group meetings and D for individual interviews. Besides these four types of recordings, the archive also contains JPEG files with photos of people and objects catalogued as E for those documented in Israel and F for those documented in Kerala. Lastly, some texts also surfaced during the documentation project; they are catalogued as G in the archive. The archive can be expanded to include any material donated by community members or other researchers.

Regretfully, the Jewish Malayalam documentation project has yet to be utilized for research and study. Merely fragments of the data collected were transcribed, translated and analyzed in casual papers on Jewish Malayalam published by me on different occasions. The bulk of the material still awaits transcription and translation. Moreover, it awaits its inclusion in the wider context of the study of endangered languages beyond the somewhat isolated niche field of Jewish languages.

The importance of the Jewish Malayalam documentation project for the community of Jewish Malayalam speakers cannot be overstated. It has contributed ethnographic, folkloric and linguistic data indispensable for the study of the sociocultural history of the community. In the following sections, I draw upon the database for linguistic and ethnographic data that is transcribed, described and analyzed here for the first time.

Linguistic Fossils and Historical Linguistics

As already mentioned above, evidence for the existence of premodern Jewish communities in the Malayalam-speaking region is scarce and circumstantial (Gamliel 2013b). Based on data recorded in the language documentation project, it is possible to supplement the existing sources and documents with evidence based on a diachronic analysis of archaic forms attested to this day in the speech of Malayalam-speaking Jews in Israel.

6 It was not until February 2016 that the first course of documentary linguistics took place at the Israeli academia at the Hebrew University.

The most prominent finding in this regard is the use of the archaic dative form *-ikkə* after the masculine singular *-aŋ*. In standard Malayalam, the parallel form would be *-ə*, which had replaced the dative ending *-ikkə* after the ending *-aŋ* by the fourteenth century (Ayyar 1993 [1938]: 27–8). As in (1):⁷

avaŋikkə iŝtam-bōle atə namukkə koŋukk.ām
 3SG.M.DAT desired-as DEM 1PL.INCL.DAT give.MOD
 According to his wish, we can give it [to someone else].

[C6, 07:22–07:25]⁸

https://ia601508.us.archive.org/32/items/FMExx6/FM_exx_1.wav

The retention of the archaic dative is a linguistic “fossil” preserved in Jewish Malayalam. It is also recognized as a typical feature of contemporary *Māppiḷa* (Muslim) dialects in Kerala.⁹ The retention of the archaic dative is evidence that by the fourteenth century Jewish (and Muslim) communities were already well-established in the Malayalam-speaking region. It is, therefore, not surprising that Jewish literature in Malayalam emerges no later than the fifteenth century (Gamlial 2015).

Another feature differentiating Jewish Malayalam from contemporary spoken Malayalam is the realization of *-a* as the accusative morpheme instead of the Old and Modern Malayalam *-e*, which branched off the realization *-ai* in Middle Tamil (Sekhar 1951: 67; Ayyar 2004: 44), as in (2):

- (2) *paṭikkaṇa rābbə allē paṭippikkaṇa*
 study.PRS.PRT rabbi NEG.Q teach.PRS.PRT
makka[-a paṭippikkaṇōṇ-āṇə
 kids-ACC teach.PRS.3SG.M-COP

The Rabbi studies, right? He teaches. He is the one who teaches the kids.

[D32-ED, 03:05–03:09]

https://ia601508.us.archive.org/32/items/FMExx6/FM_exx_2.wav

The accusative morpheme *-a* is unrepresented in any of the historical phases of evolution of Malayalam. It is retained in some castolects in Kerala, besides the Muslim and Jewish religiolects. However, this retention is more wide-spread in northern

7 The transcripts of the oral samples employ the transliteration guidelines adapted by Roland E. Asher and T. C. Kumari (1997: 406). A more precise transcript is beyond the scope of the present paper.

8 The capital letters with numbers refer to the catalogue number of the recording from where the speech samples are taken. They are followed by the annotation of the time on the recording. The catalogue is available upon request from the author.

9 T. B. Venugopala Panicker in a personal communication. [15.07.2016]

Kerala; it points at historical contacts with the Koḍagu-speaking region bordering the northernmost districts of the Malayalam-speaking region. In Koḍagu, the accusative morpheme is *-a* (Krishnamurti 2003: 227). Further evidence for the possibility of historical affiliation with Koḍagu is attested in the insertion of the increment *-ṅ-* before the accusative morpheme *-a* in words ending in *-a*. Contrarily, in contemporary standard Malayalam *a*-ending words require the insertion of a glide /y/. For example, in (3) the word *āṅa*, ‘elephant’, is marked by the Jewish Malayalam accusative morpheme *-ṅa*, *āṅaṅa*, as opposed to the parallel Malayalam form *āṅaye*.

- (3) *eṅṅaṅa* *āṅaṅa* *frījjiḍarilēkkə* *kērrī*
 how elephant.ACC fridge.LOC.DIR enter.CAUS.NFIN

[iti]l [v]ēkkum
 DEIC.LOC put.FUT

How will you keep an elephant inside the fridge?

[C12, 04:51–04:56]

https://ia601508.us.archive.org/32/items/FMExx6/FM_exx_3.wav

The affinities with the northernmost dialects of Kerala may be contested by comparable non-standard forms typical of castolects in Central Kerala.¹⁰ However, there is at least one feature that strongly points at affinities with dialects from the northern parts of Kerala and possible archaic retentions influenced by Koḍagu: the phonemic alternation unique to Jewish Malayalam in which the sublamino-palatal /z/ is replaced by /t/ in inter-vocalic position and by /s/ before the dental stop /t/. The first instance, as far as I am aware of, is attested only in writing; it must have fallen out of use before the migration to Israel. Interestingly, in at least one instance in the language documentation data, an interviewee pronounces a voiced sublamino-palatal approximant /z/ instead of a dental stop /t/: *kaza* < *kata*, ‘story’:

- (4) *kaza* *koraccə* [e]ṅikk’ *ariyām*
 story some 1SG.DAT know.MOD
 I know some stories.

[D32-ED, 00:55–00:57]

https://ia601508.us.archive.org/32/items/FMExx6/FM_exx_4.wav

Even though the alternation /z/ > /t/ seems to have been “corrected” in contemporary Jewish Malayalam, it is still remembered as a peculiar feature of Jewish Mala-

10 T. B. Venugopala Panicker derives the same form through a different process of syllabic reduction, where the increment *-iṅ-* is inserted before the accusative *-a*, e.g. *āṅa-y-iṅ-a* > *āṅayṅa* > *āṅaṅa*.

yalam.¹¹ This phonemic alternation is attested also in the speech of Tiyyas from the northernmost districts of Kerala (Subramoniam 2006: 21; cf. Krishnamurti 2003: 152), thereby providing further evidence for historical affiliations with the northernmost parts of Kerala.

While there are many other noteworthy dialectical features in Jewish Malayalam, the three features described above are significant for the study of the history of the community. Coupled with textual evidence found in historical sources, they assist in substantiating the postulation that Jews were settled in the northernmost parts of the Malayalam-speaking region by the fourteenth century. This stands in contrast to the view that Kerala Jews settled first at Kodungallur in Central Kerala and, due to nature- or human-induced calamity, they fled to Cochin and other places in Central Kerala in the fourteenth century. The linguistic fossils found in Jewish Malayalam provide concrete evidence for a better understanding of the premodern history of Kerala Jews and their settlement patterns over the centuries.

The dialectical retentions in Jewish Malayalam are insufficient as evidence for a distinct Jewish religiolect emerging as early as the fourteenth century. It is, of course, possible that the archaic features of the dialect predate the Judaization of its speakers. However, there is further evidence to support the assumption that the linguistic retentions and the Jewish identity of the religiolect belong to more or less the same period. That evidence lies in the religious terminology, which is often related to one of the most prominent features of a Jewish religiolect, namely, the Hebrew component (Gamliel 2013a).

The contacts between Malayalam and Hebrew have been attested since the earliest period in the evolution of Malayalam in ninth- and eleventh-century inscriptions. Jews left signatures in the Hebrew script on the above-mentioned copper-plate inscription dated 849. There are also several Malayalam words found in Cairo Geniza documents and written in Judeo-Arabic.¹² That in itself, of course, does not provide any evidence for a fully-fledged Jewish Malayalam religiolect at such an early stage or for the settling of Jews in the region. It does provide evidence for increased contacts between Hebrew writing people and Malayalam speakers between the ninth and the

11 Thuravoor Vishvambharan, a scholar from Ernakulam, recalled in a personal communication in 2006 that Jewish women were known to pronounce /t/ instead of /z/. He imitated this peculiar pronunciation in the following utterance, where the standard verbal form would be *kaḏiccu*:

<i>bakṣaṇam</i>	<i>katicc-ā?</i>
food	eat.PST-Q

Did you take food?

12 S.D. Goitein and Moredechai Akiva Friedman have identified several South Indian terms in their "India Book". Elisabeth Lambourn (2014) identified more terms borrowed from Malayalam to Judeo-Arabic. I identified three more words: FDY'R < *patiyār*, 'chief merchant', DNG-LY < *iṭaṇṇaḏi*, a measurement of grains weighing approximately one kilogram, RWY < *ravi*, personal name. I have also identified terms and names in other Indian languages. I intend to publish my findings in the near future.

fourteenth centuries. We can, therefore, assume that the increased contacts in the aforementioned period served as the ground for the early stages of Jewish Malayalam allowing for the incorporation of the Hebrew component in the emerging religiolect.

Hebrew loanwords appear to have been integrated in Jewish Malayalam literature no later than the fifteenth century, though it is only from the late-sixteenth century onward that Hebrew loanwords are abundant and diverse. Lexical borrowing in early Jewish Malayalam literature is limited to names of Biblical characters, though occasionally some other types of loanwords do occur like *sāddikkā*, ‘the righteous one’ (referring to Joseph) and *seūda*, ‘feast’. In the earliest compositions, we find semantic borrowing more frequently than lexical borrowing, such as calque translations like *konnakon*, ‘kings of kings’ (in Hebrew: *melek ha-malakim*) or *sattiyam*, ‘covenant’, to denote ‘circumcision’ (in Hebrew: *brit*). Based on this textual evidence alone, it is difficult to tell whether the occurrence of Hebrew words and calque translations in literary compositions reflects the occurrence of Hebrew loanwords in actual usage in that period.

At least two religious terms recorded in the casual speech of contemporary Jewish Malayalam speakers suggest that indeed lexical and semantic borrowing from Hebrew in Jewish Malayalam is close to the evolutionary stage of Old Malayalam in the fourteenth century. Both terms are hyphenated words derived through semantic rather than lexical borrowing. Since Hebrew loanwords for religious terms are borrowed from a “timeless” liturgical language, it is difficult to ascertain the period in which they were borrowed into Jewish Malayalam. Contrarily, certain Malayalam elements can be associated with different periods in the evolution of Malayalam language. The first term in this respect is *ḥiriya-divasam*, ‘Destruction-Day’, which I heard several times on different occasions. The term denotes the annual fast commemorating the anniversary of the destruction of the first and second Jewish Temples on the ninth day of the Hebrew month Ab in 586 BCE and 70 CE respectively. The common Hebrew term, *Tif’a Be-’Ab* is often replaced by *Yom Ha-Ḥurban*, ‘Day of Destruction’, which *ḥiriya-divasam* reproduces in Jewish Malayalam.

Notably, the Jewish Malayalam compound is derived from an adjectival participle *ḥiriya* traceable to Tamil *cīru-*, ‘destroy’ (Fabricius 1972: 161), while the word *divasam*, ‘day’, is derived from Sanskrit. In contemporary Malayalam, the verb *cīru-* does not denote ‘destroy’; the verb *aḥi-* is used in this meaning. Moreover, the verb *aḥi-* is the more common word in later Jewish Malayalam for translating the Hebrew verb *h.r.b.*, ‘destroy’ and its derivations, especially in the context of the destruction of the Jewish temples. Thus, the adjectival participle *ḥiriya* is likely to have been integrated into Jewish religious terminology at a relatively early stage in the evolution of Jewish Malayalam, when Tamil was still a dominant language in the Malayalam-speaking region. The combination of a word derived from Tamil with a loanword from Sanskrit further suggests that the term was created when Sanskrit was gradually replacing Tamil in scholarly and literary expressions towards the late-fourteenth century (Freeman 1998: 41).

Another term of interest is *mayyi-berāxa*, ‘dusk-blessing’, which was recorded during a group session discussing the ceremonial procedures customary after the birth of a male child. In this case, the first element of the hyphenated word is in Malayalam and the second is in Hebrew. The Malayalam element belongs to a relatively old substratum of the language; *mayi* means *iruttə*, ‘darkness’, in Old Malayalam (Pillai 2006 [1923]: 1384). The more common and modern meanings associated with *mayi* are ‘ink’ or ‘black’. The term is historically related to the verb *mayan̄n-*, ‘to grow dim or dusk’, with several adverbs like *mayyalē* and *mayimbu* derived from it to denote ‘dusk’ and ‘twilight’ (Gundert 1995 [1872]: 789–791). The Hebrew element, *berāxa*, means ‘blessing’. Combined with *mayyi* the compound denotes the blessing over the wine customarily performed after sunset to mark the passage from profanity to sacredness and vice versa on holidays and life-cycle events like weddings.

The recording with the term *mayyi-berāxa* given in (5) below is telling because it triggers a meta-linguistic discussion between the participants.¹³ The context is the special customs performed after the birth of a male child. The father of the newborn (*āvi-āben*, a Hebrew loanword) is granted an honorary status during the Saturday prayers. Once the Saturday prayer is over, the congregation moves from the synagogue to the house of the newborn for the ritual that marks the passage from the holy Saturday to the profane Sunday (Havdalah), which occurs after sunset. The Havdalah begins with the blessing over the wine.

Notably, Jewish-Malayalam speakers understand the word *mayyi* as derived from the Hebrew word *yāyin*, ‘wine’. This may not be far-fetched considering the Hebrew term *birkat ha-yāyin*. However, when compared with other Hebrew compounds borrowed wholesale into Jewish Malayalam (e.g. *āvi-āben* < *avi ha-ben*), the derivation is less convincing; we would have expected the right-branching order of words and the definite article *ha-* to be retained in Jewish Malayalam. Moreover, the phonemic shift from a word-initial /y/ to /m/ is unlikely. However, the meta-linguistic discussion is important because it depicts the speakers’ awareness of their religiolect. Note that for discussing the meanings of the term *mayyi-berāxa*, the participants shift to Hebrew (marked by braces {} to differentiate it from Jewish Malayalam).

13 Since there are several participants, I indicate their initials as follows: Yosi Oren [YO], Milka Daniel [MD], Eli Menahem [EM] and Ophira Gamliel [OG]. When several people talk simultaneously, I mark the utterance as belonging to everybody [EB].

The main speaker is Yosi Oren, who migrated to Israel at the age of nine. He commented several times that he used to listen to the stories and memories of his grandparents. His family settled in Taoz, which to this day is populated exclusively by Kerala Jews. Oren’s enthusiastic appreciation of the language documentation project contributed more than his own memories and knowledge of Jewish Malayalam—he became an inspiring model for many others in the community and a great help in interviewing older people in their homes.

(5)

[YO] *ellāvarum vannə ā vī[til vannə ē...*
 everyone come.NFIN DEM house.LOC come.NFIN
 Everyone comes and... they come to that house and...

pustōm-u[la āvədalā ko[unn.atə ellām cellum
 book-EXIS.ADJ Havdalah^H receive.PRS-NMLZ all recite.HAB
 They take up the Havdala which is in the prayer book and recite it all.

mayyi-vəṛāxa vāsttum
 dusk-blessing bless.HAB
 They bless the wine-blessing.

[OG] *ē...?*
 The what?

[EB] *mayyi-veṛāxa {yayyin!}*
 dusk-blessing {wine^H}

[YO] *mayyi-beṛāxa {ze kidduf! mayyi-beṛāxa birkat ha-yayyin}*
 dusk-blessing {DEM sanctification dusk-blessing blessing.GEN DEF-wine}
 Wine-blessing, {that's Kiddush! Wine-blessing is the blessing of the wine.}

[OG] *{ma ze ha-mayyi ha-ze?}*
 {what DEM DEF-dusk DEF-DEM}
 {What is this, this 'mayyi'?

[OY] *{mayyī ze yayyin}*
 {dusk DEM wine^H}
 {mayyi is wine.}

[MD] *{at ro 'a ze eyn ba'areš }*
 {2SG.F see.SG.F DEM NEG LOC-land}

ze ba-safa ha-hodit}
 DEM LOC.language DEF-Indian}
 {You see, you don't have it in Israel, this is in the Indian language.}

[YD] *{mayyi-beṛāxa ze ha-kidduf}*
 {dusk-blessing DEM DEF-sanctification^H}
 {the wine-blessing is the Kiddush}

- [EM] {*hem hayu kor'im le-ha-kol be-'vrit* }
 {3PL.M be.PST.PL call.PL.M DAT.DEF.all INST-Hebrew}
 {They would call everything in Hebrew}
- [YD] {*rak et-ze šarix la-da'at*}
 {only DO-DEM need to-know}
 {It's necessary to know just this.}
- [YO] {*gam ze mayyi-verāxa ze kvar ke'ilu*}
 {also DEM dusk-blessing DEM ADV as if}
 {That too is 'dusk-blessing'. It's as if it is already,}
- {*ze kvar nimša be-tox ha-malayalom*}
 {DEM ADV EXIS.SG.M LOC.inside DEF-Malayalam}
 {it's already there inside the Malayalam.}
- {*ze rak ha-yehudim yagidu* }
 {DEM only DEF-Jews say.3PL.FUT}
 {Only the Jews will say that.}

[C6 08:48–09:44]

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Oral History and Documentary Linguistics

Guided by the principles of documentary linguistics (Himmelman 1998; Gipert *et al.* 2006; Austin 2015), the Jewish Malayalam documentation was defined right at the outset as a multi-purpose project. One of the most pressing concerns in many of the meetings and interviews was with the history of the community. Depending on the speakers' memories and personal interests, the recorded conversations and interviews reveal different aspects of Jewish history in Kerala varying between accounts of daily life to historical incidents, anecdotes and legends. In the previous section, the examples were drawn from an account related to daily life in the past. This present section focuses on other examples of oral history.¹⁴

The first example of oral history is a memoir recorded in English and the second is an etiology recorded in Malayalam. Despite the differences, both center on the community of origin of each narrator: Chendamangalam and Parur respectively. This is notable since the history of Kerala Jews heavily relies on a repertoire of legends, myths

14 Note that in accounts dealing with daily life, the habitual verb form (HAB) is amply used, whereas in historical accounts the past form (PST) is more prominent.

and memoirs drawn almost exclusively from the Paradesi community in Cochin. As a result, the overall image of Kerala Jews overemphasizes the Jewish heritage of Cochin and, in particular, of the Paradesi community. Jewish Malayalam speakers hailing from different communities and towns in Kerala are therefore eager to voice their version of history to counterbalance their image of being of lesser pedigree and prestigious origins.

The first story in (6) narrates the rise of the Zionist movement in Kerala. It was recorded in English because one of the listeners was a Telugu speaker who was curious to meet Jews from Kerala in Israel.¹⁵ The interviewee, fluent in English, wanted to share with the Telugu speaker visitor from India his version of the rise of the Zionist movement in Kerala. The language is a non-standard South Indian variety of English. Notably, the speaker uses the place name Cochin as an attributive for Kerala Jews (Cochin Jews), even though his community of origin is Chendamangalam. This is partly due to the aforementioned prominence of Cochin in the historiography of the community; Kerala Jews, when speaking with “outsiders” refer to themselves as Cochin Jews, whereas between themselves the reference would always be to the community of origin. It is also due to the fact that the modern state of Kerala was formed after the implementation of the States Reorganisational Act (1956) two years after the majority of Malayalam-speaking Jews migrated to Israel (1954). Except for Parur, the towns in which Jewish communities were located were included in the princely state of Cochin prior to Indian independence from British rule.

(6) You know, the, the ... How the first immigration of the first group? No. The Aliyah¹⁶ from Cochin? It is started from a man called Eliyahu Meir. I am calling him the Herzl¹⁷ of Jews of Cochin. The Aliyah, immigration, from Cochin started from him because this gentleman—he was serving in the army, Indian army, in the air force he was in 1932 to 45, he served in Bangalore air force center. And once he was called by the British officer to punish him for something he had done wrong, he didn't salute somebody or something. And when he entered, the British officer was sitting there. He looked on him, looked at the file and asked him, “What is your name?” He told him, “Eliyahu Meir”. “Are you a Jew?” “Yes ...” “Then why are you standing? Sit [with] me! Sit here with me!” He invited him to sit. And he asked him [...] And he ... Eliyahu Meir told, “I am from Chendamangalam. We are the Jews there.” Then he said, “Do

15 The recording took place in the southern village Shachar in June 2008 at the home of the narrator, Bezalel Eliyahu (born 1930, migrated 1955). The people present were Miriam Dekel, a Jewish Malayalam speaker, Vimala Katikaneni, a visiting researcher from Andhra Pradesh and the present author.

16 *Aliyah* literally means ascent in Hebrew. It is a special term denoting immigration to Israel, conceived as a movement upwards.

17 Benjamin Zeev Theodor Herzl (1860–1904), one of the founding fathers of the Zionist movement.

you know who I am? I am the deputy manager of Anglo-Palestine Bank in Jerusalem! Every night you come to drink with me beer!” From that day he explained to him and got many [pamphlets] in English, about the Kibbutzim, Moshav all this coming in Israel.¹⁸ And he told him, “In the near future there will be a state of Israel!”

Whenever he come, for, off to Cochin, he collected ... we were boys ... all the boys, he collected all of us, giving lecture—we, one day, we will go to Israel. I am getting contact, I will write ... everybody was very ... wonderful to hear, but the important person like [...] all told he was ... eh ... one screw is gone ... he says simple, stupid, he is telling what he’s telling ... Three years he was talking on this, but he finished with war, and he returned back, he started to write.

From that time he started to write here and there. This man helped him to address contact; that way started the movement. Then came ... till that time, the Israel state forming, and the Jewish agency people are coming up to Bombay only, not to Cochin. Then, in 1948 ... the only place in Kerala hoisting a flag in Iyar, Fifth of Iyar,¹⁹ on Friday evening, this is Chendamangalam. I had arranged the flag hoisting. All the youngsters—they made a rally on through all Chendamangalam street. Our older people advised not to make it because the Muslims will come and kill us. No, we made it, we made a flag and then collected some money and gave to a man in Parur, who is making, repairing radio to hear voice of Kol Israel La-Gola²⁰ and, we paid him money and we all, some people, are sitting to hear ... nothing heard. We lost the money.

Aliyah. From that year, every year, I was arranging celebration of Fifth Iyar in Chendamangalam. Every year I am planning, I am collecting money; I am writing stories, I am directing the people, I am acting. And people coming from Ernakulam, Cochin to see the ... the ... our drama and everything. Till we migrated there. It was came²¹ from Chendamangalam; the migration started from Chendamangalam.

[D6 00:00–04:41]

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- 18 Kibbutz and Moshav are agrarian Jewish settlements, with the former based on communist ideology and leading a communist way of life (in the past). *-im* is the plural marker in Hebrew. Interestingly, the narrator uses one Hebrew term in the plural and one in the singular.
- 19 Fifth of Iyar is the Hebrew date for Independence Day for the State of Israel.
- 20 The narrator refers to a broadcasting service of the Jewish Agency that was launched in 1950 under the name Kol Zion La-Gola, ‘the voice of Zion to the Diaspora’.
- 21 The verbal formation “was came” may reflect contact with colloquial British English, in which the formation “was sat” is acceptable by native speakers, though only with the verb “sit” (as confirmed by my colleague Cathy Cantwell in a personal communication, April 2016).

This narration juxtaposes right at the outset a communal figure, Eliyahu Meir, with Theodore Herzl, an iconic founder figure in the history of the Zionist movement. At first, Eliyahu Meir is associated with Indian identity as he serves in the Indian army. His character is somewhat subversive; he gets in trouble with the British officer, representing the colonial authority. The narrator attributes this to a lack of respect for hierarchical order (“He didn’t salute somebody or something”). But, when his Jewish identity is exposed, he gains the favor of his superior, and the relationship between the two transforms into friendship (“come drink beer with me!”). The next step is the revelation of the Zionist national identity through the agency of the British authoritative friendship. The young and somewhat subversive Jew marks the emergence of young and progressive leadership within the Jewish community of Chendamangalam. His Zionist leadership skills attract the youngsters while meeting the opposition of conservative powers (“important person”) who mock him at first (“one screw is gone”).

Importantly, the narrator stresses that the Zionist leadership and organization was an internal development within the community; the Jewish agency neglected them, they only reached as far as Bombay. This is, in fact, a very painful point in the history of Kerala Jewish migration to Israel in the early 1950s. Even though the Jews of Kerala organized themselves to move *en masse* to the newly-founded State of Israel, the Jewish Agency authorities refused to grant them permission to migrate for two years. The professed reason was the fear of elephantiasis being transmitted to Israel by the migrants, even though the disease is not contagious (Chiriyankandath 2008: 39–41). The narrator obliquely addresses the issue of racial discrimination against his community by stressing the lack of involvement of the Zionist leadership in the rise of Zionism among Kerala Jews.

The Zionist activities carried out in Chendamangalam are described as typical Kerala political activism—there are rallies, hoisting of the flag and even a drama to attract Jews of other communities in Ernakulam and Cochin. The narrator highlights the importance of his own community in the Zionist movement in Kerala. He further prides himself in his personal role as a communal organizer. In this way, he obliquely addresses inter- and intra-communal tensions and rivalries: with the Jews of Cochin and Ernakulam (and to a certain extent even of Parur, which had the largest population of Jews in Kerala), with the Muslim neighbors, as well as with the older conservative generation.²²

While the narration in (7) below is utterly different from (6) in almost every respect, it is similar in its highlighting the importance of the community from which the speaker hails, in this case—Parur.²³ Note also the reference to Cochin instead of Kerala as a general reference to Jews from the Malayalam-speaking region—*kocchikār*, ‘Cochinites’. Similar to (6), the narrator turns the spotlight on her own community

22 For the history of the Zionist movement in Kerala see Chiriyankandath 2008.

23 The narrator is Hemda Tiferet, who migrated from Kerala to Israel in the 1970s. She told the story in a communal gathering in the southern settlement of Nevatim in May 2008.

of origin, Parur, by referring specifically to *paṛūkkār*, ‘Parurites’. This narration too begins with a question designed to provoke the listeners for their interest. It also ends with the narrator as the focal point and with her first-hand memories as validating the truth of the legend she narrates.

Note that there are Hebrew components embedded in the narration; some of them were in use before migration to Israel, like *bedāmikkadāfə*, ‘House of Holies’, i.e. the Jewish Temple. This term is documented in Jewish-Malayalam songs that predate the late-eighteenth century. However, the Hebrew loanword *sīppūr* is likely to have been borrowed after migration to Israel. The older Jewish Malayalam term for a Jewish story is *māssa*, ‘legend’ (< *ma’ase*, Hebrew).

(7)

eṅre *kūṭṭukāratti* *paṛaṅñə* ...
1SG.GEN friend-F said
My friend told me ...

entukōṭṭ-ā *nammute* *koccikār-iṭayilə* *kovāṅim-leviyim illāttē*²⁴
Q-INST-COP our.INCL Cochinites-ADV priests^H-Levites^H NEG.NMLZ
How come there are no priests and Levites among our Cochinites?

appa *paṛayan-atə* *sīppūr* *paṛaṅṅ-atə*:
then tells-NMLZ story^H told-NMLZ
Then, what she tells was a story that she told:

oru-bāṭə kāf’ *uṅṭāy-irunn-appa* *palli* ... *ē*... *paṛūkkār-uṭe kayyilə*
a-lot cash became-PRF-when synagogue Parurites-GEN hand-LOC
There was once a lot of cash money at the hands of the synagogue, eh, the Parur people.

appa *aviṭe* *orubāṭə* *kovāṅim-leviyim* *okke* *uṅṭāy-irunnə*
then there a-lot priests^H-Levites^H all became-PRF
At that time, there were many priests and Levities there,

avar.kkə *bedāmikkadāfə* *paṅiy.aṅo-nnə* *paṛaṅṅə*
they.DAT temple^H build.DSD-QUOT said
they wanted to build a temple, they said.

bedāmikkadāfə *paṅiy.āṅ-āyittə* *sādhaṅṅaṅṅalə* *okke* *uṅṭākki-irunn-atə*
temple^H build-INF-ADV things all make-PRF-NMLZ
They made all the things required for building the temple.

24 < *illātt-atə*

ē... ādyattə ēven-piṇa vaikk.āṇ-āyittə vann-appa
 firstly foundation stone^h put.INF-ADV come-when
 When they first came to lay down the foundation stone,

atu vaccu-pōzatt-ēkkə aviṭe oru-bāṭṭə sukha-kēṭ’ oṇṭāyi
 that put-when-ADV there a-lot disease became
 As soon as they laid it down, they were struck by so many plagues.

āḷukaḷ oru-bāṭṭə cattə appa oru karaṇam ippa ceyy.ēṇṭa
 people a-lot died then one reason now do.DSD.NEG
 So many people died, then, “There’s a reason, [we] should not do [it] now”.

ellām mūṭiy-iṭṭə kure-kālam kaṣiṇṇ-iṭṭə
 all cover-put.NFIN some-time elapse-COMP.NFIN
 All was covered, some time elapsed,

tiriye oru-prāvafyam-koṇṭə ceytu-nokki
 again one-occasion-ADV do.NFIN-tried
 and they tried once more to do [the same].

tiriye sukha-kēṭṭə oru-bāṭṭə vannə kōlara taiṭōḍə
 again diseases a-lot came Cholera Typhoid
 Once more, the plagues hit them: Cholera, Typhoid ...

aṇṇaṇatte sukha-kēṭṭə vannə oru-bāṭṭə pōyi-kaṣiṇṇ-appa
 like that diseases came.NFIN a-lot went-COMP-when
 When plagues hit them like that and so many [people] perished,

avarə at-ellām [v]iṭṭu-pūṭṭiy-iṭṭ-uṇṭə
 they that-all forsook.locked-COMP-PRF
 They forsook everything and locked it up.

ayiṇṇe²⁵ mōḷēḷ²⁶ kāṭ’ okk’ aviṭe vacci
 that.GEN top.LOC forest all there put.PST
 On top of that, the forest grew all over.

ippōz-um ā stalattə aṇṇaṇe oṇṭ’ ennə parayaṇə
 now-CNJ DEM place.LOC like that EXIS QUOT say.PRS
 Even now, that place is still like that, they say.

25 < *atiṇṇe* (intervocalic /t/ > /y/) >

26 < *mukaḷil*

paṭṭiṇṇārattē *kāṭṭ-arv-atiṇre* *purav' iṣṭa-nna* *stalam uṇṭ' atə*
 west.LOC.EMP forest-edge-DEM.GEN behind pleasing-AD place EXIS DEM
 That's the nice place behind the western edge of the forest.

naṇṇa[ə] *kaḷikkāṇ* *pokunna* *samayattə*
 we.EXC play.INF go.PRS.PRT time.LOC
 When we were going to play there,

aviṭe *ayiṇr'* *aṭutt-ettum-baṣett-ikk-um*²⁷
 there DEM.GEN near-reach-when-ADV-CNJ
 Whenever we got close to that [place] there,

marru[at'] *ellām* *piḷḷēr* *ellārum paṛayum*
 other all kids all say.hab
 all the other kids used to say,

aviṭe *pōvalla* *pōlla* *cattu-pōvum*
 there go.NEG go.NEG die.NFIN-NVOL.FUT
 Don't go there, don't go! You will die at once!

atu-konṭə *ippōṣum* *ōrmmay* *uṇṭə*
 DEM.INST now.CNJ memory EXIS
 Therefore, I still remember it even now.

[C5 00:22–01:59]

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The story of the failed attempt to rebuild the Third Temple in Parur is suggestive of the stereotype associated with the Jews of Parur as proud and haughty; the Parurites were so rich and affluent in the past that they could afford rebuilding the Jewish temple in their own town. Moreover, their community at the time still retained the Jewish priesthood elite (Kohens and Levites), the loss of whom deprived all Kerala Jews of this prestigious Jewish descent.

Conclusion

The documentation of Jewish Malayalam provides a database for linguistic “fossils” that complement the segmented picture we have of the history of the community during the first half of the second millennium CE. The description and analysis of

²⁷ < *aṭutt-ēttum-bōṣett-ēkk-um*

the database created in the project show that documentary linguistics can be crucial for historical linguistics in particular and for a more comprehensive picture of the history of minority and subaltern communities in general. Additionally, the recorded database guided by a multipurpose approach contains previously untold oral histories that represent communal identities that may differ from often biased notions about such marginal communities. In the case of Kerala Jews, the communal identities that emerge of the untold stories challenge the conventional perception among historians and “outsiders” who differentiated between “White Jews” and “Black Jews” (e.g. Segal 1983), regardless of the local identities sustained by Malayalam-speaking Jews even today.

Language documentation projects usually aim at the preservation of endangered languages. Malayalam is far from being an endangered language, but the dialects typical of religious or communal minorities are often subject to gradually falling out of use due to the rapid changes in the way of life, state education and mass media and, in the case of Kerala Jews, even migration and detachment from the native land of their regiolect. The Jewish Malayalam documentation project exemplifies the contribution that studying a regiolect can have to the study of the history and culture of a minority community. Hopefully, the field of Dravidian linguistics will be enriched by similar language documentation projects among communities at the margins of history and cultural studies on the region.

List of Abbreviations

1=first person; 2=second person; 3=third person; ACC=accusative; ADV=adverb; CAUS=causative; CNJ=conjunctive; COMP=completive; COP=copula; DAT=dative; DEIC=deictic; DEM=demonstrative; DIR=directive; DSD=desiderative; EMP=emphatic; EXC=exclusive; EXIS=existential; F=feminine; FUT=future; GEN=genitive; H=Hebrew; HAB=habitual; INC=inclusive; INF=infinitive; INST=instrumental; LOC=locative; M=male; MOD=modal; NEG=negation; NFIN=non-finite; NMLZ=nominalizer; NVOL=non-volitional; PL=plural; PRF=perfect; PRS=present; PRT=participle; PST=past; Q=question; QUOT=quotative; SG=singular

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