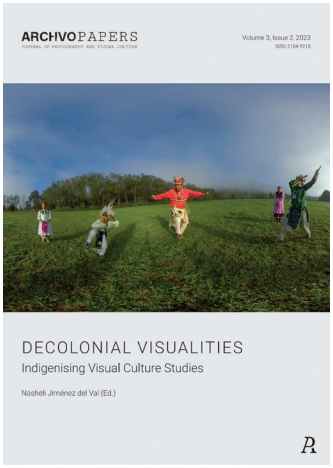

ARCHIVO PRESS

ARCHIVOPAPERS
JOURNAL OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND VISUAL CULTURE

ISSN (Online) 2184-9218

ESSAY

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To cite this article:
DALVIN, Nevin. "Elements of Colonisation and Indigenisation: Changing Lucifer into Kali," *ARCHIVO PAPERS* 3, nº 2 (2023): 51-67.
https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10038099

Published online: 26 October 2023

ARTICLE

ELEMENTS OF COLONISATION AND INDIGENISATION: CHANGING LUCIFER INTO KALI

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Abstract

This article discusses the nature of Indigenisation seen on the murals of Syrian Christian churches in Kerala, focussing on St. Mary's Jacobite church in Angamaly, Ernakulam. Kerala has several churches with elaborate murals which, have not received sufficient attention and quite a few questions remain unexplored. These church murals were formed out of interactions between the Portuguese, the church of East and the local religion. In the 16th century, the Portuguese exerted control over Kerala churches that had formerly been affiliated with the Church of the East. Some of the questions addressed in the article are: What are instances of Indigenisation seen on church murals? What are the different kinds of Indigenisation visible? How does this weave into a global narrative? What is the colonial and decolonial politics behind such image representation? These areas are discussed in the following article.

Keywords: Indigenisation, Colonisation, Syrian Church, Church mural, Demonisation

INTRODUCTION

There exists a widespread belief that Christianity was introduced to Kerala in 52 CE through St. Thomas, the Apostle. He converted many people to Christianity, chiefly from Brahmin and other high-caste Hindu families.[1] The second set of Christians was formed when Thomas of Cana led Syriac Christians from the Middle East to India sometime between the 4th and the 9th century. This historical migration has strengthened the bonds between the Indian church and the Church of the East. Copper plates referring to this migration exist but are of a substantially later date. The newly converted Christians by St. Thomas the apostle and the later migrants led by Thomas of Cana came to be known as *Nasranis*[2] in Kerala. They were given an equal footing with the upper caste Hindu societies prevalent during the time, and rulers bestowed several high privileges on the group.[3] They adhered to the high caste Hindus' customs in matters of untouchability, dress, food and ceremonies among other things.

When the Portuguese arrived in Calicut (1498 CE), they were amazed to see a pre-existing Christian community in Kerala. The Portuguese missionaries tried to bring the native church under Western ecclesiastical administration by overthrowing its connections with the East Syrian church. The Thomas Christians or the native Christian community were most affected by a Portuguese intervention. Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth-century Mariology experienced a new following in Kerala and different parts of India. With the arrival of British missionaries, a new form of movement was also introduced to the churches that were following the Marian cult. This was the Counter-Reformation movement. The Counter-Reformation art (1545-1563) was mainly dedicated to the exaltation of the Virgin Mary to defend the dogmas against attack by Protestant Christians, affirming her Divine Maternity and Immaculate Conception. This article traces the instances of Counter-Reformation art and the nature of Indigenisation seen on Christian church murals with respect to Mary and other goddesses.

St. Mary's Syrian Jacobite church in Kerala contains a rich religious iconography disseminating powerful messages. It is hard to miss the fascinating mural of hell when one enters the church. This panel is populated by sinners, whose naked bodies are subject to various degrees of punishment, while a demonic figure sits on a throne overseeing the pandemonium. The striking detail here is that an image of Bhagavati replaces the figure of Lucifer. Immersed in the flames of hell, she holds a trident and cradles Jude of Iscariot on her lap, who has the bag of silver in his hand while she orders demons to inflict torture on the sinners. In the hell panel, goddess Bhagavati surprisingly takes the place of Satan as she is placed in the centre of the scene overlooking the activities in hell.

For Malayali Hindus, the warrior goddess Bhagavati occupied a position much like that of the fierce female warrior deities of Tamil Nadu. Bhagavati is a figure who engages in titanic warfare against demonic forces. In Kerala, this deity

Figure 1.
Bhagavati as Lucifer, St. Mary's Jacobite Church, late 17th century, mural painting, Angamaly, Kerala, photograph by the author.

was worshipped as the tutelary divinity or *kuladevam* of many elite *Nayar*[4] land-holding lineages. In spectacular festivals, the great Bhagavati shrines of Kerala commemorated the goddess's victories over the demons or asuras.

In much of India, male deities are predominant in Puranic Hinduism, and the female deities occupy a subsidiary position. However, in the Dravidian cults of South India, the virgin goddess is the most worshipped. Incarnations of Kali or Durga, these virgin goddesses are commonly called the *grama-devatas*.[5] They drive away epidemics and bring rain and wealth for the good harvest. These are ancient goddesses who get incorporated into Pauranic Hinduism as incarnations of Kali and Durga- in fact they would have been independent local goddesses. For this reason, these goddesses are known as the guardian deities of the villages. These *Grama-devatas* are often associated with violence and sacrifice. They are the source of death and a new life, and they possess a duality of both nourishing and destructive nature. For example, Mariamman is one of the most widely worshipped *grama-devatas* in South India. She is worshipped as the goddess of smallpox in Tamil Nadu. She holds power to inflict and at the same time heal epidemics and prevent disasters. In most regions of Tamil Nadu, Hindus, Christians, and Muslims worship her alike.[6]

RECASTING GODS AND GODDESSES

When the Portuguese arrived in Calicut (1498 CE), a Christian community was already existing in Kerala. The Portuguese missionaries tried to bring the native church under Western ecclesiastical administration by overthrowing its connections with the East Syrian church and also alienating the catholic beliefs from a syncretic relationship with Hindu religion. Encountering such a widespread cult of a female deity in Kerala may have prompted the Catholic clergy to depict or command a representation of Hell with Bhagavati or Kali as Satan reigning over the underworld.

The intention was to convey a clear message to the newly Hindu converts casting their former goddess as evil. However, this method of demonisation was not a new approach taken by the colonisers in Kerala. Pre-Hispanic goddesses and gods were also portrayed as demons in colonial descriptions and representations by religious orders. This strategy was used in parts of Latin America and Mexico.

The colonial strategy of incorporating local deities as Christian demons in Latin America is reminiscent of strategies used by Christianity at its very beginning. Gods such as Pan and Bes from Greek and Egyptian mythology were also re-casted as demonic since Christianity relied heavily on the concept of monotheism.[7] The demonisation of the Indigenous/local gods by the colonisers was facilitated by Mesoamerican or Indian concepts, in which the gods and goddesses represented both benevolence and malevolence, creation and destruction. One such example

Figure 2.
Mouth of Hell, St. Mary's Jacobite Church, late 17th century, mural painting, Angamaly, Kerala, photograph by the author.

is that of the Mictlantecuhtli. The Aztec god, Mictlantecuhtli also known as a god of the dead and the king of Mictlan, the lowest and northernmost section of the underworld, was such an example. He was incorporated into the Christian definition of hell and added various attributes around the representation of hell. Casting a folk goddess as a demon has also been part of the missionaries' propaganda in their colonial territories. The example of Tzitzimime[8] tells us the story of a parallel demonisation propaganda. In this example a monstrous deity from the Aztec pantheon who was probably invented to explain maternal mortality was fiercely portrayed by the local artists. Such a deity was easily associated with the devils by Catholicism.[9]

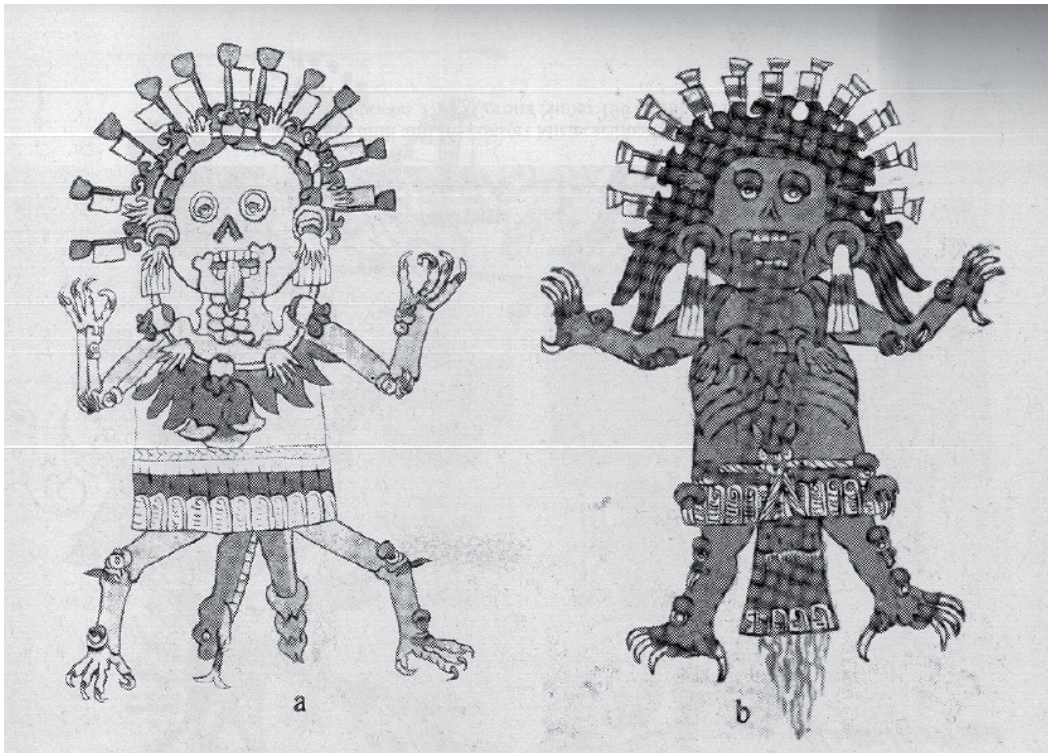


Figure 3.
Cecelia F. Klein, Tzitzimime, Codex Tudela, 1980, Illustration, U.C.L.A. Courtesy by the author.

The demonisation of Indigenous deities is better understood in light of the prominence that Christian beliefs have accorded to them as a source of mysticism and witchcraft since ancient times. This explains why, when the colonisers confronted the Indigenous gods or goddesses, the missionaries' response was not scepticism about the sinister power of these deities but the rapid acceptance of it, incorporating them into their narrative or beliefs. They admitted the power of the deity, its might and mystical nature. Still, they attributed this power to the effectiveness of a "Christian devil", not favouring Indigenous gods and goddesses. Hence, one could conclude that the colonisers' fundamental objective was not to understand the local beliefs but rather, to understand the reality that made them a devil.

In popular European works of art, Satan is depicted as a dark monstrous creature. Satan is shown with twisting horns and has an open mouth dripping with

the blood from the consumed bodies. Dead bodies are held in each outstretched hand, and sometimes snakes are entwined around legs. With this idea of Satan in mind, it is no wonder that the European sailors and priests who arrived in South India saw the local female deities and mistook them for Devil. The female divinities in the native land were portrayed as black or blue, naked in appearance, with long sharp fangs. The freshly severed heads as an ornament and the crowned head hooded with five serpents resonated with the European portrayal of Satan.

When Castaneda, a Portuguese traveler who accompanied Vasco da Gama on his voyages to India, landed at Kappad, near Kozhikode in 1498 A.D., he recorded his and a friend's experience walking into a Hindu temple under the mistaken belief that it was a native church. However, as they entered the church, they noticed images resembling monsters. Certain figures painted on the walls possessed four arms. To the Portuguese travelers, the images resembled those of European devils, casting doubt on their presence in a Christian church. Most likely, the European travelers visited a Bhagavati temple located between Kappad and Kozhikode.[10]

The Western missionaries and later Western scholars also tended to misinterpret Indian art and often saw monsters where the artists had intended gods.[11] According to Partha Mitter, the Western gaze saw the images of multiple armed and headed gods as monstrous because they challenged the Western concept of rationality. According to the idea of the West, an image with more than two arms or one head was *contra naturam* or unnatural and, therefore, contrary to rationality. However, such ideas did not originate till the 19th century but went right back to the Middle Ages in the West. Hence the biblical demons, Hindu gods and classical monsters were all lumped together with congenital abnormalities under the label of the Devil.[12]

In the famous engraving by Georg Breu in Ludovico di Barthema, the representation of Deumo of Calicut also resembles the character traits of Bhagavati. Found inside the King of Calicut's "chapel", the Devil sits in the flame of the fire, has four horns, wears a triple crown and is shown eating a body and holding one by the waist. This portrayal reminds one of the towering figures of Satan in the St. Mary's church while the attendant devils and creatures torture the damned. This is also similar to the fresco by Francesco Traini at the Campo Santo in Pisa. The triple crown references the Popes in hell, and the other references play on numbers, reminding the dragon of the Apocalypse. The dragon here stood for the pagan empires of the East. The portrayed image can hardly have had much connection with the icon in Calicut that it claims to represent and instead is heavily overlaid with well-established Christian demonic iconography.

However, within a similar setting in Mexico the Spanish were convinced that the Mexicans lived in an idolatrous universe. The colonial inquisitors regarded goddesses such as Chalchiuhtlicue and Xipe Totec as demonic. By substituting the image of the Catholic Virgin for these idols, they effectively erased them from the popular consciousness and Mexico's pantheon of gods.[13]

Unlike many colonisers' strategies to dismantle the sacred spaces of the

local religions to impose their hegemony, the Portuguese administration was keen on advocating a policy to convert the local masses or even disrupt the harmonious bond between the local religions. They did so by actively converting a vast majority of people from the existing religions or portraying other gods and goddesses as essentially evil. However, despite these attempts, the Hindus and Syrian Christians who have survived the colonial rule formed a complex variant of syncretism, i.e., rare in the South Asian culture.

ELEMENTS OF INDIGENISATION

The richness of Indigenous elements found in the wall paintings often has an interesting cultural code behind them. Similar to these churches, which were influenced by colonial rule, the churches of Latin America also exhibit similar cultural coding methods in their murals.

The church murals in this article focus specifically on the landscape, and biblical figures call the viewers' attention to visual details that are commonly overlooked. This includes the consistent tendency of native artists to paint biblical events against native backdrops reflecting the local landscape; the presence of characteristics associated with native mythology among images of Eden, Hell, and Heaven. The striking similarities between native representations of sacred trees and the garden of Eden with painted flowers and vegetation that seemingly grow upon the native land. All these instances reveal glimpses into how local artists framed Christianity within a native sacred view during the early years of evangelisation.

Local artists created the murals in these Syrian churches; their understanding of local culture and tradition was reflected in the murals through the depiction of various Indigenous elements. Similarly, their techniques and practices were based on local tradition resulting in a more symbolic and narrative depiction than figuratively accurate. This is the case not only in Kerala but also in Latin American countries such as Peru. In both these regions during the colonial period, the artistic production generated as an interplay between European religious imagery and local artistic practices. As mentioned earlier, the local artists mediated the imported images by incorporating Indigenous elements, community beliefs and local histories.

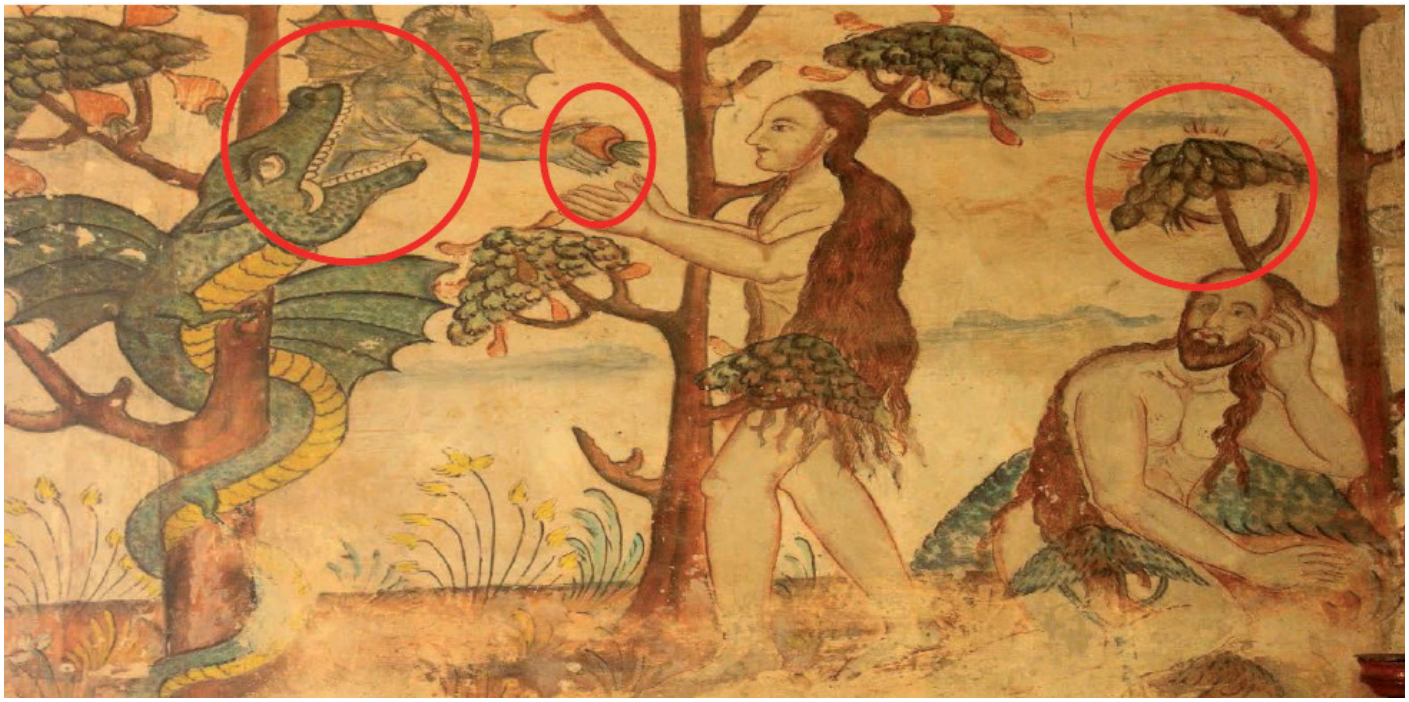
The ceiling of the St. Mary's church resonates with the European Renaissance coffered ceiling. There is a carved lotus flower in the centre of this coffer.[14] Its presence in Hindu iconography might be the reason this motif was easily accepted in Kerala. In Hinduism, the lotus denotes purity and knowledge; the lotus flower rises above worldly contamination and stands for spiritual perfection and authority. The Hindu iconographic representation uses this motif in the most conventional or stylised shape. The limited use of colours, such as malachite green, red, ochre and the heavy decorative borders dividing the picture space are other elements in this church that reveal a similarity to the traditional temple painting of Kerala. Similarly, in early Christian iconography, the peacock was seen as a symbol of the

resurrection. Its flesh was thought to be incorruptible, and it was often imbued with the same properties as the phoenix, which rises miraculously from the flames. This is hinted at the meaning attached to the many South Indian traditions of St Thomas and the peacocks.

Another example of Indigenisation seen in St. Mary's church is the image of Adam and Eve in the right pane of the altar. A devil-like creature emerges from the Makara wrapped around the Tree of knowledge. The Devil offers Eve the forbidden fruit which, unlike the common representations wherein an apple is used to denote

Figure 4.
Tadeo Escalante, *Mouth of Hell*, Church of Huaro, 1802, mural painting, Peru, https://mavcor.yale.edu/.

Figure 5.
Adam and Eve in Eden Gardens, St. Mary's Jacobite Church, late 17th century, mural painting, Angamaly, Kerala, photograph by the author.



the Tree of knowledge, a persimmon is shown.[15] Persimmon is a typical South Asian fruit and could be found natively. This again hints that the local artist who might have copied the image from a print or under the instructions of a prelate understood it as a local fruit rather than an apple that was strange and unknown to them.

In India, snakes are also associated with trees, and they are worshipped as divinities or in relation to a specific god. Once again, the Catholic prelate probably has instructed the local artist could have used this kind of creature because they have interpreted the snake as a guardian of the Tree of the knowledge of good and evil. However, the Makara-serpent is shown on this mural with a foreign devil emerging from its gaping mouth. By such a portrayal of the image, the Hindu apotropaic symbol is transformed into a Christian symbol of evil, giving a negative connotation to the sacred Makara.

The portrayal of Makara equally sheds light on the phenomenon of Indigenisation. In ancient Indian mythology, Makara is a crocodile-like animal, with a snout resembling the curled trunk of an elephant and its teeth like the side tusks of a bear. They are usually depicted with a lion or snake emerging out of their stretched mouth. In the Hindu scriptures, the Makara's have apotropaic powers, and they can avert evil spirits. This is one of the reasons why they are commonly seen on the footsteps, lintels and arches of temple entrances across South East Asia. Hence, in a way, the Makaras stand guard over the doors of sacred spaces. The image of Makara is also used for depicting the vahana of the gods and goddesses. For example, in Hindu iconography, a Makara is the vehicle of the river goddess Ganga and the water god Varuna.

Similarly, the portrayal of water in Cusi Guaman's mural at the church of Urcos in Peru symbolises the baptism of Christ, whereas water in Inca traditions is a symbol of life and wealth. Likewise, a parrot can be found in the fresco of St. Christopher in the Seville Cathedral. In a similar portrayal as to Albrecht Durer's famous engraving of Adam and Eve, the mural showcases a tropical parrot in the place of a bird from Durer's work. The parrot's symbolic representation occupied a distinct role as they were Indigenous to the Eastern slopes of the Andes.[16]

Another example is that of David and Goliath. A unique depiction of David and Goliath is displayed above the altar archway of St. Mary's church in Angamaly. The depiction of Goliath is of particular interest as he is dressed as a native king, resembling a ruler from the Indian subcontinent. According to the Bible, Goliath is a giant Philistine who was defeated by the young David, who became the future king of Israel. In popular belief, Goliath represents paganism according to the Judeo-Christian tradition. On the contrary, David is shown as the champion of the God of Israel. By carefully choosing this theme to depict in a Syrian church, the intention behind this image was to project the sovereignty of Christianity over the local faith by showing the suppression of a native Indian king.[17] This also acts as an example of Indigenisation seen on the church murals in various Syrian Christian churches of Kerala.

In conclusion, through inserting native symbols in the murals artists transformed the Christian churches into sites of local history. These subtle additions and compositions rationalised the European iconography. Hence, these mural artists relied on their viewers' knowledge of Christian iconography, including a diverse set of local, traditional references codified within a colonial visual language. These murals were not just static paintings on the church walls but also active expressions of local identities sieved through popular Christian scenes, representing a plethora of meanings and possibilities for the assertion of Syrian Christian beliefs, visions and counterclaims to colonial principles.

Nevertheless, the inclusion of local elements could have multiple meanings. Firstly, they contribute to a new iconography where the old gods are now, in the new religion, presented as demons. Secondly, they localise the new religion and make it less foreign by situating its narratives in the local landscape, flora and fauna. And thirdly the incorporation of local deities even if they are projected as demons can also play into the familiarity of these images for the local communities reinforcing links with the old gods.

These aspects of local history and culture, whether in Kerala or Latin America, deliberately showcase the efforts of the Indigenous artists to create multiple registers of legibility amongst the local parishioners. The portrayal of biblical themes by incorporating Indigenous elements work together to place characters from foreign mythology within the local space and time. Conversely, they recognise the region within which the church stands under Christian history and teleology.

EVANGELISATION IMAGES

In St. Mary's church, Angamaly, there is another female divinity above the high altar. This is the Immaculate Virgin, occupying the most revered position on the high altar hidden away from the public's gaze with her place high above eye level, a shroud shields her. Why is the Virgin Mary present, located at the most revered spot of the church but given a position that shrouds her visibility? And why is Bhagavati present so prominently in the church, ruling over the flames of hell? The understudied yet complicated relationship between these two divine females in this church is explored here, where one goddess is venerated and worshipped while the other is demonised.

As a response to the reformation movement, specific images were introduced to the Catholic churches. Common themes include the Devil and the representation of Hell, the Immaculate Virgin crushing a serpent or a dragon etc. Similar themes were used by the Spanish colonisers in Peru and other Latin American countries. Once colonised by the Portuguese rule, parallel representations of the Last Judgement, the portrayal of Hell can be seen resembling in the Syrian churches mentioned earlier in this article. These images acted as an effective tool of evangelisation in the European colonies to convert the local population.

Many of the folk goddesses in Kerala were traditionally portrayed in a malevolent or militant form, arousing fear and awe, making it easier to appropriate them into demonology. Much like Tzitzimime, the local goddess Bhagavati was also banished from a place of piety and demonised as part of the evangelisation process by the catholic friars. In contrast, Mary is shown as a benevolent, divine and beneficent figure and offers a different female divinity model. One may see the recasting of Bhagavati as the Devil revealing the tensions between Christianity and local Hindu or animist cults. But it is not a simple confrontation between a monolithic Hinduism and a monolithic Christianity that is encoded here. What lies behind Mary's position is a complicated tale of tensions between two kinds of Christianity - the ancient East Syrian church on the one hand and the Catholic church brought by the Portuguese, on the other. Mary's centrality is a feature of Catholicism imposed upon Kerala's pre-existing Syrian or Eastern Church by the Portuguese. What follows is an analysis of the histories, tensions and antagonisms between different faiths and sects seen in Kerala's Syrian Christian churches' murals.

The Portuguese missionaries adopted a careful iconographic representation of Mary one that portrays ideas of divine protection and benevolence. Mary, as Immaculate one, was portrayed dressed in spotless white with a blue mantle or scarf. Her hands joined in prayer, and solar rays around her body, the crescent moon and the head of a dragon of sin bruised beneath her feet. This representation stands in direct opposition to the fierce goddesses of the local tradition, confronted by the missionaries. In addition, Mary's careful portrayal allowed the worshippers to connect more with a divine figure, who is also a mother.

In a country where the cult of Mother goddesses was prominent, this allowed the faithful to align more to Mother Mary's figure than to Bhagavati, who is always depicted as inhuman and gruesome. Bhagavati's representation, was often seen as hostile and helped in demonising the deity. Bhagavati or Kali was also perceived as a radical figure operating against the colonial patriarchal system already in place. For all the above reasons it was imperative for the local goddess to be replaced with a more acceptable and benevolent Mother Mary figure.[18]

However, it is worth noting that the main aim of the Portuguese Padroado was not to convert a Hindu population but to "correct" an already existent Christian population practising a form of Christianity that was very different from Catholicism. The beliefs and rituals of Thomas Christians probably appeared to the Portuguese as a lapsed kind of faith that was too close to local cults. This confounding situation in Kerala is not a copy of what happened in Latin American countries during their colonisation. Many of the Latin American countries in its context witnessed forcible, violent and wholescale conversion and abjuration of a former faith. However, in Kerala, we observe a different phenomenon where a pre-existing Christian congregation was being corrected and reformed into a Europeanised Christianity. Hence, it becomes crucial to understand that even though the Portuguese used many evangelisation strategies, the result was not a carbon copy because the situation in Kerala was different from that of Latin America and Mexico.

FROM THE MIDDLE AGES TO THE PRESENT: A SUMMARY

Currently, a few churches in Kerala follow a cultic tradition associated with Mary. These festivities, often syncretic with the local customs, have slowly become part of the Christian congregation. These events may be a procession or a performative ritual within the church's compounds where women from other religions also take up the role in performing these acts related to Marian worship. The Nagapuzha possession, the miracle worship at Kuravilangadu and Vallarpadom are a few examples of the Marian worship seen in the Syrian Christian community. At the feast of Mary in St. Mary's Church Nagapuzha in Ernakulam, there is a practice of meditation where people from all communities and different walks of life participate. The church once facilitated people to become possessed to treat those with psychological disorders. This practice is no longer followed.

Similarly, the church at Kuravilangadu, known as Major Archiepiscopal Marth Mariam Archdeacon Pilgrim Church, celebrates Mary in remembrance of her miracle. She appeared to a group of hungry children and transformed the stones into bread, and created a spring to satisfy their thirst. Thousands of devotees flock in during the Marian fest to drink the water from the spring, which is believed to have healing powers. The Vallarpadom church also has its distinct festive practices. As the name indicates, the National Shrine Basilica of Our Lady of Ransom has an approach rooted in the tradition of submitting one's life to the protection of Mary. Also popularly known as *Adima*, this practice protects people from all dangers and grants their wishes.[19]

These churches use the image of Mother Mary to appeal to their masses showcasing them as a reminder of the possible miracles and boons. This image-worship or a celebration of miracle carefully places Mary in a position shown as a kind figure always answering the prayers of the mass. Even when she is portrayed as a divine figure, she still bears the title of a mother, signifying her human persona. This visual portrayal has enabled the holy figure to connect to a more extensive section familiar with fierce or purely divine goddesses. In all these contexts, Mother Mary is worshipped as a goddess who grants her followers' wishes, who are human and no lesser than her. In conclusion, despite the attempts to impose a "correct" form of Christianity by the Portuguese and introduce the Marian cult to counter the local goddesses, the local forms of practices and beliefs eventually reassert themselves and take hold of Mary filling up her character with local meanings and rituals.

Even if the Portuguese succeeded in superimposing Mary's figure in Syrian churches, there still were conflicts in the background. For example, in 1836, priests like Abraham Malpan from Maramon spearheaded a reformation movement within the Church. He translated the Holy Qurbana liturgy from Syriac into the local tongue Malayalam, omitting prayers for the dead and saint invocations, among other things. This resulted in a reformed version of West Syriac Rites used in the seminary and a few parishes.[20] However, the most significant choice was to eliminate all prayers, adoration, and devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints in favour of the

primacy of the Word of God. This led to a struggle within the church and other factions who venerated Mother Mary and placed her in the highest position.

Nevertheless, even after these conflicts between Western and Syrian rites, Mary still holds the church's central figure. Moreover, Mary's name supersedes many of the Syrian church's identity, which more than once wholly disregarded Mother Mary's worship. The pre-existing pictorial representations of virgin goddesses in South India made it easier for the friars to associate them with the Devil. Considering the ancient religions suspicions regarding women's association with evil and the Devil, the Christian tradition from the very beginning incorporated such misogynist ideas into their religion as well. This same religious approach to women and the Devil was shaped by officials of the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century when they came to India. The inquisitors and the clergy considered witchcraft a typical and dangerous part of Satan's concerted attack on all humankind.

Most of these ideas discarding female deities came from the book The *Malleus Maleficarum*, loosely translated as the *Witch's Hammer*. This book, written in 1486, describes the perverse nature of women and their predisposition to participate in witchcraft and other works of the Devil. This work became the chief source of information about the characteristics and activities of witches and a veritable encyclopaedia of witchcraft. To summarise, the book had its influence extended throughout Christian Europe.[21] These documents relating to the inquisition and demonology are highly misogynistic but the placing of Bhagavati in hell is most likely related to her power. In fact, one could argue that Bhagavati is honoured to be placed in this central position in hell as she becomes the ruler of Hell displacing Satan who has a settled place in Christian iconography – she is not side-lined as an attendant demon but is given the most important place.

The Catholic propaganda reached its zenith in the St. Mary's Church with this representation of hell. Placed in the central position, Kali looks over the suffering, while various sinners are punished in the three rows below. The whole mural is composed so the hell is inside the open mouth of Leviathan.[22] She is accompanied by two other devilishly portrayed women who stand by her side; Bhagavati/ Lucifer looks at the monstrous creatures, snakes and other poisonous insects torturing the sinned bodies in the commotion below. This sort of representation could be powerful but also frightening for any churchgoer. With this tactic, the Catholic friars envisioned convincing the natives that worshipping their goddess would bring them only misfortune and hell's tortures. Such an image representation reflected the medieval and misogynist minds of the friars who supervised the murals. However, the mural of hell conveyed an uncertain message for the local Hindu viewers as their goddess always possessed a duality and had destructive and creative powers. This did not fit the monovalent form of medieval Christianity and their notion of the witch and the Devil.

Through the Portuguese Padroado and the military, the colonisers were bent on dominating and transforming Syrian religious life. They did not bring about massive rural, structural and economic dislocations as seen in their other

colonies. Their focus was mainly on converting Syrian Christians to the Catholic rites and bringing the local population to the church. However, their inability to remove Hindu traditions rooted in Syrian churches along with the continuation of the Hindu ceremonies, demonstrated that the eradication of local culture was out of Portuguese control. What still mattered most were forms of worship that confronted the power of fierce blood-taking goddesses and other divine bearers of healing and destruction. The combination of evolving cults, observances and ritual which we now describe as "Hinduism", are still widely thought of as a universal set of norms rooted in concepts of Brahmanical purity and puranic scripturalism.

Religious symbols played a massive role in transporting their deities to the neighbouring faiths of the region. This culture of inducing a new set of religious icons, faith and symbols often calls for resistance from the pre-existing religions in the area. This resistance put up to fight the conversion and inquisition continues to give birth to a new cultural process in which the conversion effort put forth by the colonisers and the resisting force by the natives creates a ripple effect forming multiple facets of the same religion.

The same approach can be seen in parts of India such as Goa and Kerala, where the Portuguese have exerted control over the existing religions and introduced a new form of faith challenging the pre-existing ones. Ethnographic and archival data bring to the fore the hidden history of conflicts between the religions. This method of combining archival materials and ethnographic studies proved particularly successful in Goa, in tracing religious conflicts between the Portuguese and the Hindus. At the same time, in Kerala, the presupposed syncretic form of worship has eliminated conflicts between religions with records of disputes been lost in the sands of time.

NEW MODES OF SEEING

The reproduction of an image in a new colonial context does not always signify a simple replication of a foreign culture. Instead of blindly imitating visual and textual models due to historical encounters with international and local media, the church murals developed as a set of new forms of Syrian Christian cultural expressions. While most murals elicit a visual experience nested within a chaotic and dense composition, it also acts as a gateway through which a viewer enters a different plain. As mentioned by Serge Gruzinski, these forms within the murals serve as an "attractor" for the local population to look at it with awe. Through his analysis of images in colonial Mexican mural paintings and across colonial Latin America, he claims that the peculiar forms seen on murals is the result artistic freedom, creativity and experimentation without any fear of censorship under their colonial masters.[23]

These murals also encompass biblical scenes replete with tropical fruits, Hindu mythological figures etc., even though they are based on European iconography. These relationships between foreign and local, European and Indian,

virtuosity and materiality were constantly expressed and renegotiated through new visual codes. The church murals hence offer a microcosmic snapshot of these negotiations through time. From ecclesiastical prescription to willful appropriation, these murals underwent dramatic transformations that were carefully mediated by the local artists who produced them and the congregations who viewed them.

The murals were likely influenced by the European prints whose compositional structure directly affected them. However, their chromatic vibrancy demonstrates a stunning departure from the European black and white engravings. The murals in these Syrian churches developed a unique artistic style characterised by flattened, Indigenous forms and a vibrant colour palette. Despite the studies and existing historiography of Syrian Christian murals, there is still no evidence that European prints served as the principal and the sole model from which native artists drew their compositions. But the practice of mural tradition did not emerge out of thin air. A careful observation of the local background helps us understand a visual landscape which determines the stylistic growth of murals in the post-colonial world.

The intersection of the multiple pictorial elements in the murals produces an impasse of several balancing opposites: abstract versus representational; decorative versus figural; ordered versus chaotic; static versus dynamic. Their juxtaposition demonstrates artistic creativity and agency, seamlessly combining figures derived from the local tradition and culture along with the instructions given to them by the Portuguese prelates. The collective impact is a unified composition that exhibits both a productive visual tension and remarkable harmony.

As mentioned earlier when images and deities come together is not a simple replication of the old image in the new context. One can see mixing and mistranslation of images in the colonial context of Latin America, but this is not replicated in the context of colonial South India. In Kerala the local population was aware that their goddess was the source of death and new life, so this did not scare them. Moreover, unlike the Christian gods, she was the guardian deity of their villages and not a foreign presence. For these reasons, the cult of Bhagavati survived the harsh Catholic propaganda and is still very much alive as she is worshipped all around Kerala.

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1 There is a range of evidence to support the St. Thomas tradition (for instance, the apocryphal Acts of (Judas) Thomas). For the text, see Albertus F. J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1962). Whether or not St. Thomas was indeed the founder of Christianity in Kerala, there is incontrovertible evidence that Christianity flourished in Kerala as early as the 4th century AD.

2 *Nasrani* is an Arabic term for Christians derived from the Hebrew word *Netzer* or the Aramaic *Nasraya*. Saint Thomas Christians in Kerala are also popularly known as *Nasrani*.

3 One surmise is that this was done in return for the gifts of money bestowed by the Christians on the rulers who at that time were under siege by various invaders. See L. Krishna Ananta Krishna Iyer, *The Anthropology of the Syrian Christians in Malabar* (Ernakulam: Cochin Government Press, 1926).

4 A particular caste group in Kerala also known as *Nair*.

5 This expression translates to "Goddess of a village".

6 Susan Bayly, "Hindu Kingship and the Origin of Community: Religion, State and Society in Kerala, 1750–1850," *Modern Asian Studies* 18, no. 2 (1984): 177–213.

7 Jan Assmann, *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008).

8 Tzitzimime is a monstrous deity associated with Aztec star demons. They are born during childbirth when a woman dies in labour. They cannibalistically prey on women and children mainly. They are depicted as skeletal female figures wearing skirts in Aztec representations.

9 Cecelia F. Klein, "The Devil and The Skirt: An Iconographic Inquiry into the Pre-Hispanic Nature of the Tzitzimime," *Ancient Mesoamerica* 11, no. 1 (2000): 1–26.

10 Michael Geddes, *The History of the Church of Malabar, Together with the Synod of Diamper* (London: Sam. Smith and Benj. Walford, 1694).

11 Mitter 1977.

12 Ibid.

13 Serge Gruzinski, *Images at War: Mexico from Columbus to Blade Runner (1492–2019)*, trans. Heather MacLean (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

14 Patrizia Granziera, "Cultural Interactions and Religious Iconography in 16th Century Kerala: The Mural Paintings of St. Mary's Church in Angamaly," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*, Vol.30 (2017).

15 Granziera, "Cultural Interactions and Religious Iconography," online.

16 Ananda Cohen Suarez, *Heaven, Hell, and Everything in Between: Murals of the Colonial Andes* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2016).

17 Granziera, "Cultural Interactions and Religious Iconography," online.

18 Ibid.

19 Landy 2014.

20 Chris Maunder, *The Oxford Handbook of Mary* (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2019)

21 Felix Wilfred, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia* (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2014).

22 Leviathan is a demonic sea serpent in Jewish mythology. This primordial sea serpent is noted in theology and mythology and is referenced in several books of the Hebrew Bible, including Psalms, the Book of Job etc.

23 Gruzinski, *Images at War*, 55-78.