

Processions in the East Syriac Liturgy of the Hours

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Introduction

The origin of processions in the Christian liturgy seems to be related to the stational liturgical services. There developed stational liturgical services after the period of persecution in the 4th century at the age of Constantine at Jerusalem in the 'Holy Land'. The early Jerusalem Christians were active to visit the tomb of Christ, Calvary, and the Mount of Olives. The diary of Egeria speaks of these stational liturgical services.¹ The travel diary of this Spanish pilgrim nun gives the detailed account of the Jerusalem cathedral services between 381-384 AD at the sepulchre in the Church of Resurrection (*Anastasis*) and on Calvary in the church of martyrdom (*Martyrium*) of our Lord during the episcopate of St. Cyril (d. 368 AD). Chapter 24 of her travelogue describes the liturgical services at different hours. The two privileged daily hours were the *Ramsa* (vespers) and *Sapra* (matins). The offices contained the select Psalms, canticles, Scripture lessons, and petitionary intercessions suitable for the needs of the people and of the hours with popular participation through responsories and antiphons. The ceremonial use of light, incense, and processions enriched the heartfelt experience of particular hours.² The East Syriac liturgy has adapted various rites from the Jerusalem stational liturgical services and the development of the rite of procession deserves our special attention.

In the East Syriac liturgy, especially at the end of *Ramsa* and *Sapra*, there take place the liturgical processions. At the end of the proper of the *Ramsa* on Sundays, before the *Onitha d-Basalique* there is a procession from the *bema* to the Altar, in remembrance of the resurrection of our Lord. On Ferial days, there is a procession after the *Ramsa* and *Sapra*, before the

1 Cf. Anne McGowan and Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Pilgrimage of Egeria: A New Translation of the Itinerarium Egeriae with Introduction and Commentary*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2018, 29-46.

2 John Moolan, *Liturgy of the Hours*, OIRSI, Kottayam, 2016, 127-130; 168-173.

Onitha d-Sabde to the beth sahde, in remembrance of the martyrs.³ But these processions are absent in the present Syro-Malabar text perhaps due to the shortening of the original text for the Malayalam text. Here we shall make a study of the processions found in the original text of the East Syriac Liturgy of the Hours.⁴

1. *Onitha d-Basaliqe and the Procession*

The second proper part of *Ramsa* begins with the rite of procession. In the Byzantine liturgy we may find the stational procession during the Royal Anthem known as the *Onitha d-Basaliqe*, which is held at the conclusion of Sunday or festal *Ramsa*, following the prayer of inclination. Originally, in the Byzantine Church they had the custom of going in procession to receive the Emperor who was coming to take part in the vesperal office. *Basaliqe* is a Greek term, which literally means “palace” of an emperor or a king, originated from the Greek king, Basileus. Due to the presence of the Emperor, the procession was known as “*Basaliqe*” (royal) and the hymns sung during the procession were called “*Onyatha d-Basaliqe*”.⁵

In imitation of the processions of the Byzantines, the East Syrians have introduced the same in their Divine Office. The institution of this procession among the East Syrians is attributed to Iso’yahb III (c. 650).⁶ The Anonymous Author also gives an explanation about the origin of *Basaliqe* and its imitation by the East Syrians. According to him, it is introduced in honour of *Sleeva* as the symbol of risen Lord, the King of life and death.⁷ Abraham Bar Lipeh also speaks of this fact, but he notes

3 Sylvester Pudichery, *Ramsa: An Analysis and Interpretation of the Chaldean Vespers*, De Paul Press, Bangalore, 1972, 164-165.

4 *Slotha Qanonaita D’kahne: Breviarium juxta Ritum Syrorum Orientalium id est Chaldaeorum*, Bedjan Paul and Khayyath J., eds., Vols.1-3, The Congregation for Oriental Churches, reprint Romae, 1938, published by the Congregation for Oriental Churches as the approved text of the Liturgy of the Hours, both for the Syro-Malabarians and the Catholic Chaldeans, Hereafter *Breviarium*. The edition by the Assyrian Church of the East is *Ktaba da-Qdam wa d-Batar wa d-Hudra wa d-Kaskull wa d-Gazza*, T. Darmo ed., Vols.1-3, Mar Narsai Press, Trichur, 1962, Hereafter *Hudra*.

5 Sylvester Pudichery, *Ramsa*, 169.

6 Sylvester Pudichery, *Ramsa*, 41; Cf. Iso’yahb III, *Expositio I*, 152-153.

7 Sylvester Pudichery, *Ramsa*, 169. Cf. *Expositio II*, 154-155.

another fact that the name “*basalique*” is due to the name of a king called Basilius.⁸

For the East Syrians after the proper evening service on Sundays there takes place a procession, which is called *Basalique*, which begins from the *bema* to the sanctuary. The *Sleeva* which is taken from the *bema* is placed in its proper place in the sanctuary (Aps).⁹ This procession begins from the *bema* to the sanctuary, making a round inside the church. After entering the sanctuary, the *Sleeva* is placed in its place in the apsis. The East Syrians have adapted from the Greeks only the name of *Basalique*. For the Greeks, it was the procession in honour of the king; but for the East Syrians Churches it is a procession in honour of the *Sleeva*, in remembrance of the resurrection of our Lord and the redemption brought about by the victory of the *Sleeva*.¹⁰

The hymn called *Onitha d-Basalique* is sung during this procession. This processional strophe is also called ‘Royal Anthem’. It is variable according to the day. Every Sunday or feast day has its proper strophes of *Onitha d-Basalique*. It is repeated with different verses of psalms and other scriptural verses having one or more strophes with “*Sambal*” and “*alam*”. Christmas, Epiphany and some other feasts have a series of strophes. This indicates that the processions of these days were so long and were conducted outside the church.

The *Onitha d-Basalique* and the processions are reserved for Sundays and Feast days. On ferial days the *Onitha d-Basalique* is called as *Onitha d-Ramsa*, which is of recent origin.¹¹

2. *Onitha d-Sahde* and the Procession

8 Sylvester Pudichery, *Ramsa*, 169.

9 Sylvester Pudichery, *Ramsa*, 41.

10 Sylvester Pudichery, *Ramsa*, 170.

11 We do not know the origin of *Onitha d-rama* for ferial days. For the procession of ferial days or memorial days there is the *Onitha d-sahde* after the proper *Ramsa*. According to the exposition of Pseudo-George of Arbel and others we come to know that in early times after *Ramsa*, every day the monks were receiving the Holy Communion. Therefore, we have to infer that the *Onitha d-rama* is a later addition from the thanks-giving hymn of monks at the reception of the Eucharist after vespers on ferial days. Therefore, the *Onitha d-basalique* is on Sundays and feast days, the *Onitha d-rama* is on the ferial days and the *Onitha d-sahde* is at the end of *Ramsa* on ferial days and memorial days.

There are processions, on Ferial days, to the *beth sahde*, situated at the right side near to the sanctuary, the place where the relics of the martyrs are kept or the burial place of the martyrs. Hymns in honour of the martyrs are sung during this procession. They are called *Onyatha d-Sabde*. Each day for *Ramsa* and *Sapra* there are proper hymns of martyrs (*Onyatha d-Sabde*). They are sung at the end of the ferial *Ramsa* and *Sapra*. In Lenten season these hymns are omitted.¹² The *Onyatha d-Sabde* are beautiful hymns, narrating the life and deeds of the martyrs and imploring their intercessions and prayers.

In Bar Lipeh's interpretation there is no mention of the *Onyatha d-Sabde*. Pseudo-George of Arbel speaks of the hymns for ferial days; but not for Sundays, feasts and the season of Lent.¹³ Hence these may be considered as later additions. We see these hymns at the final pages of *Breviarium* and *Hudra*.¹⁴ A good part of these hymns are said to be composed by Mar Marutha, bishop of Maiphrakat (5th century).¹⁵ These hymns are intended to give courage to the faithful to keep up their faith, reminding the sufferings borne courageously by the martyrs.

In the Nestorian edition we read:

This holy one (Mar Marutha) was a member (participant) in the universal council of Nice. As he travelled in the countries of East and West and saw the murder of the holy martyrs of the church of God in both these parts (West and East) he composed these hymns (*qale*) of martyrs to be sung in the churches during *sapra* and *ramsa* (morning and evening services). And afterwards other zealous doctors of the church, added short pieces of “*onyatha*” to be sung in choir for the remembrance of the holy martyrs, for the encouragement of the faithful, for the knowledge of the disciples, and for the glory of the name of God, the Lord of hosts, to whom is glory and adorations for ever – Amen.¹⁶

12 Sylvester Pudichery, *Ramsa*, 57.

13 Sylvester Pudichery, *Ramsa*, 196.

14 Cf. *Breviarium*, 347-373; *Hudra* Vol.3, 420-463; Arthur John Maclean, *East Syrian Daily Offices*, Rivington, London, 1894, 12-16(Monday Ramsa); 25-29(Tuesday Ramsa); 32-35 (Wednesday Ramsa); 37-41(Thursday Ramsa); 43-47(Friday Ramsa); 51-54 (Saturday Ramsa); 109-130 (ferial days Sapra); 172-184 (Sunday Sapra). The *Onyatha d-Sahde* are absent in the present Syro-Malabar text.

15 Sylvester Pudichery, *Ramsa*, 57, 196.

16 Cf. Nestorian Breviary, *da-qdam wa-d-batar*, 198 as quoted in Sylvester Pudichery, *Ramsa*, 57. The same idea is also given by Abdiso in his *Exposition of the Service of the Myateries*, 88. Cf. Abdiso, *Exposition of the Service of the Mysteries*,

In the *Ramsa* office after the *Onitha d-rama* we see a *surraya*¹⁷ (alleluiatic psalm) which is generally very short. At the end of this 3rd *surraya* after “*Avun d-wa-Smaya*” (Our Father in heaven) two prayers are given; but no title is given to them.¹⁸ Perhaps the first prayer is the proper *buttama* of *Ramsa* and the second can be the opening prayer for the added procession.¹⁹ And it is quite logical to think that at early times there was on these ferial days a procession after *Ramsa* in remembrance of the martyrs, to the *beth shade*.

We come to note that at early times for all Sundays and Feast days there were processions after proper *Ramsa*, which is called *Basalige*, beginning from bema to the sanctuary, making a round inside the church, singing the *Onitha d-Basalige*. On Ferial days, in remembrance of the martyrs, there were processions at the end of *Ramsa* to the *beth sabde* and during the procession the *Onitha d-Sabde* is sung.

3. Festal Processions

Sometimes, liturgical processions developed on the basis of the necessities due to the liturgical season. In the East Syriac tradition some processions originated because of the special requirement of the liturgical season of summer (*Kaitha*). Since it is difficult to conduct the entire prayer service inside the church due to the heat of summer, the East Syriac tradition had the custom of celebrating the Divine Office and the first part of the *Qurbana* till Gospel outside the church till the winter begins. In such situations the processions extended even beyond the main structure of the church building. So, from Ascension Day till the dedication of the Church the prayers are conducted outside the church, in the courtyard. The *beth slotha* (summer chapel) and *darta* (portico) are such extensions of the church building necessitated by the extended processions.

There started also two other processions, one on the feast of the Ascension of Christ and second on the first Sunday of the dedication of the Church. The Church commemorates the Ascension of Christ into heaven on Thursday, forty days after Easter. The *Ramsa* begins as usual and

Mannoorampampil Thomas, trans., *Pithakkanmarude Kudashabhashyangan* (Malayalam), OIRSI, Kottayam, 1992, 22-44.

17 Sylvester Pudichery speaks of it as “*Surraya*”, taking the “*surraya de-qdam*” and “*surraya d-batar*” as the first and the second *surraya*.

18 Cf. Breviary, 13-14 as seen in Sylvester Pudichery, *Ramsa*, 161.

19 Sylvester Pudichery, *Ramsa*, 161.

the hymn “*Laku Mara*” is sung five times as on Lord’s feasts. When they begin “*Laku Mara*”, all go to the courtyard, taking in procession the *Sleeva*, the *Ewangelion*, thurible and candles and from this day till the dedication of the Church the prayers are conducted outside in the courtyard.²⁰ On the first Sunday of the dedication of the Church there is a solemn entrance into the church. From the practice of this day this period also is known among the East Syrians as “The period of Entrance”. The solemn entrance to the church takes place during the *Ramsa*. After the usual psalmody and the “*Onitha of incense*” (*ayk etra*) sung in the courtyard, a procession takes place carrying the *Sleeva*, the *Ewangelion*, thurible and candles. During the procession, a special *Onitha* is sung, which has seventeen strophes and more. When they enter the church, the *Sleeva* and the *Ewangelion* are placed on the throne and they continue the *Ramsa*.²¹

According to Pseudo-George of *Arbel*, on all Sundays from Passion Friday till the feast of Ascension, processions were conducted outside the church, to the *Sleeva*, which was erected in the courtyard of the church. On Christmas, Epiphany and some other feasts also processions were conducted during the festal *Ramsa*, singing the *Onitha d-Basalique* repeated with different verses of psalms and other scriptural verses having one or more strophes with “*Sambah*” and “*alam*”.²² The fact that the *oniyatha* have series of strophes, indicates that these processions were very long.

Generally, among the East Syrians, the procession moves within the church; but sometimes it goes out of the church, and if so, it moves around the church and returns to the *Beth Slotha*. *Beth Slotha* is probably the summer chapel which is situated outside the church where there is an altar for the *Sleeva* and for the *Ewangelion*. Among the *Marthoma Nazranies* of India, on the eve of the feast or on the day of the feast this procession goes out of the church and moves around the big granite *Sleeva* erected in the churchyard. It may be around the church building or beyond. On this occasion, this granite *Sleeva* is exceptionally illuminated with small lighted oil-lamps.²³

20 Sylvester Pudichery, *Ramsa*, 121.

21 Sylvester Pudichery, *Ramsa*, 147-148.

22 Sylvester Pudichery, *Ramsa*, 169-170. Cf. *Expositio II*, 155.

23 Cf. V. Pathikulangara, *Qyamta w-Hayye w-Hudata*, 81; Sylvester Pudichery, *Ramsa*, 168.

3. Liturgical Processions as Best Means for Faith Formation

The East Syriac Churches express their theology more through the various liturgical celebrations than through the dogmatic presentation of the doctrinal formulae. The theology for the Syriac tradition is centered on the celebration of the mystery of Christ. Soteriology, ecclesiology, eschatology, pneumatology, Mariology, and so on are viewed as an inseparable part of Christology, because the eternal plan of Divine Dispensation is Christocentric. Christ is the centre and culmination of the Divine Dispensation. This eternal plan of God is historically fulfilled in and through Christ (Heb 1:1-2). The dispensation of Christ is accomplished through the salvific deeds of Christ: the passion, death and resurrection. The East Syriac liturgy is always Christocentric. Liturgy, the source and summit of the life of the Church, is the celebration of the Mystery of Christ through signs and symbols. It is an anamnesis of the total mystery of the saving deeds of our Lord and an act of faith by the worshipping community. It comprises the incarnation of the Son of God, His public ministry, passion, death, resurrection, ascension and the second coming.

All the processions in the liturgy are related to the basic theme of Divine Dispensation. The procession occupies a unique role among the liturgical celebrations where we celebrate the Divine Dispensation of God the Father, in Christ, through the Holy Spirit with the sentiments of confession of faith, praise, adoration, thanksgiving and supplication. The liturgical action of procession concentrates on the Mysteries of Christ. The early Christian processions had a highly commemorative character recalling the salvific events of Christ. It is evident in the processions described in the diary of Egeria.²⁴

The Liturgy of the Hours, especially the *Ramsa*, *Lelya* and *Sapra*, celebrate Christ the Light.²⁵ The *Ramsa* and *Sapra* which include prayers to

24 George E. Gingras, *Egeria: Diary of a Pilgrimage*, Newman Press, New York, 1970, 104-105; 115-118.

25 The *Ramsa*, after the psalmody contains a composite rite: that of light and incense. In the incensation we pray Christ to accept our prayers as the incense; in the rite of light (*Lucernarium*) the lights are lit in the sanctuary; and this symbolizes Christ the light of the world. The *Huttama* of the *Ramsa* prays to Christ, the light of the Father. The *Sapra* starts from the symbolical meaning of sunrise, and celebrates through cosmic praise of Christ as the giver of light and the light of Universe. In the *Onyata d'Nuhra*, St Ephrem sings Christ the Light from the Father who leads us to salvation and life. In the second stanza he sings: "The day has shone forth on the sons of men, and the power of darkness has fled; a light has shone forth for us

the saints have a Christological theme. The Sunday Office is the celebration of the Resurrection of Christ. Then while the *Onitha d-Basalige* is chanted, the bishop and priests go in procession from the bema to the sanctuary symbolizing the mystery of the resurrection of Christ. The *Sleeva*, the symbol of the body of Christ, is taken from the altar of the *bema*, the symbolic representation of Gagulta, and placed at the centre of the sanctuary-altar symbolizing the death, burial and the glorious resurrection and ascension of Our Lord.

The Mystery of Christ is accomplished through *Sleeva*. The role of *Sleeva* is evidently seen in the commemoration of the mystery of passion, death, resurrection and the second coming of Christ (Mt 24:30). Therefore, *Sleeva* is really the theological sign par excellence of the Divine Dispensation. The *Sleeva* is an especially significant and the oldest symbol in the Christian liturgical processions. In all the processions of the East Syriac liturgy the use of the *Sleeva* is very notable. The East Syriac Churches use in the processions a simple but decorated cross without the depiction of the figure of Jesus. The importance of the *Sleeva* in the liturgical processions is evident from the liturgical commentaries.²⁶ The *Sleeva* is almost always accompanied by the *Ewangelion*. The *Sleeva* and *Ewangelion* not only signify the whole salvific mystery of Christ and the symbol of the salvation which humanity received through the salvific mystery of Christ but also symbolizes the whole person of Christ himself. Thus, the use of *Sleeva* in the liturgical processions has its unique role symbolizing the whole economy of salvation.

Conclusion

A closer observation of the processions reveals the fact that there is a strong incidence of the principle of *mimesis*, as distinguished from the principle of *anamnesis* in the processions. The principle of *mimesis* emphasizes the element of involvement on the part of the worshipping community, while the principle of *anamnesis* emphasizes the commemorative performance of the content of *mimesis*. We actualize the Mysteries of

from his light, and has enlightened our eyes who were darkened.” In the *teshbohta* of Narsai there is a marvelous meditation on the light of Christ with which the era of understanding begins after the preceding era which was that of ignorance: with the revelation of Christ the day begins for human kind. Cf. A.J. Maclean, East Syrian Daily Offices, 167-168.

26 Charles Payngot, *The Cross: Its Place in the Hudra and Its Sign in Baptism and Eucharist*, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation presented at the Pontifical Institute of Oriental Studies, Rome, 1971, 41, 154-155.

Christ in the liturgical processions. During the procession, the Church makes the memorial of the mysteries of Our Lord and tries to actualize them in the faithful through their spiritual disposition. Liturgical rituals were always carefully selected and introduced in the liturgy, to imprint the faith of the Church in the minds of the believers and thus, the doctrine is lived, that is expressed, celebrated and transmitted in and through the liturgy. The symbolic presentation of the mystery of Christ through the liturgical processions touches the heart and mind of the faithful, and elevates them to the heavenly experience.