



Research Paper

Divine Transformation: The Sacred Mission of Native Minister William Fletcher in Historic Travancore

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Abstract: *The missionary endeavours during the British era significantly restructured the socio-economic framework of Travancore, fostering substantial improvements in the populace's condition. Fueled by government tolerance, South Travancore witnessed a surge in Christianity to a confluence of factors, Government tolerance, active missionary work, and the faith's appeal to specific communities, particularly the Parayars, large number of Shanars, and other lower castes, all contributed. This growth was evident in places like Nanjend and surrounding districts, which saw the construction of numerous churches, schools, and a flourishing Christian population. Missionaries actively spread their message: They used catechists (religious instructors) to travel through villages, distribute religious materials, and preach to Hindus. This implies a proactive approach to conversion efforts. A cadre of missionaries, including Vedamanikam, Rev. W.T. Ringeltaube,¹ Rev. Charles Mead, Mrs. Johanna Mead, Mrs. Martha Mault, and Rev. Charles Mault of the LMS, undertook the formidable task of emancipating the slave caste. These pioneers, alongside later LMS missionaries, sacrificed personal comforts and faced substantial hardships in their relentless quest to liberate the enslaved community. This article explores the remarkable life and legacy of William Fletcher, a missionary in colonial India. From his humble beginnings to his impactful work in empowering marginalized communities, Fletcher's journey is a testament to compassion, resilience, and advocacy. William Fletcher, a native missionary, provides valuable insights into the lives of the people of Travancore. He explores the persecutions endured by the lower castes at the hands of the upper castes in Travancore and the resultant impetus for the conversion of the slave castes to Christianity. Through his dedication and selflessness, he became a voice for the voiceless, leaving an indelible mark on missionary history.*

Key Words: William Fletcher, Colonial India, Christian Conversion, Missionaries, Lower Caste, Hymn, Samuel Mateer, catechist

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The history of the London Missionary Society (LMS) is often recounted through the lens of European missionaries, highlighting their endeavors and sacrifices in spreading Christianity. Dick Kooiman underscores the vital role of "native agents" within the LMS, arguing that they were a significant factor in the organization's success. On September 28th, 1825, Rev. Charles Mault in Nagercoil, Travancore, confirmed the presence of native missionaries in the region. The LMS acknowledged a communication gap and updated on their missionary efforts in Travancore.² They highlight the role of local "Native Readers" and mention some key personnel involved. Needless to say, in the history of Travancore, there were many women missionaries who were unsung heroes, some of them were Martha Mault and Aunbu, Thavie (kindness)³, etc. Women, brave enough to venture into the untamed jungles amidst wild beasts, far from the comforts of their homes, undeterred by challenges and hardships, to proclaim the message of the Lord Jesus Christ!⁴ Indeed, both young men and young women can contribute significantly to the noble endeavor of disseminating the Gospel to the heathen.⁵ In the 1864 Juvenile magazine of LMS mentions some other native missionaries.⁶ Though these catechists bear English names, they are known in their families and among their friends by their Tamil names. In 1826, missionary Mault reported⁷ that "thirty-three Readers submitted weekly accounts of their activities. Observing a marked increase in effort among some Readers, Mault expressed profound satisfaction with their advancements

in religious knowledge.” He underscored the critical importance of this educational progress, particularly for its future utility in missionary endeavors. In every noteworthy hamlet or urban settlement where an assembly of people is present, there invariably exists at least one individual designated as a Reader. Readers in each village with a congregation fulfilled a variety of roles, including instructing the congregation, leading worship services, engaging with non-believers, and even acting as part-time schoolteachers for small groups of children. However, with only a limited number of Readers (10-12) across the entire district, these responsibilities were quite demanding.⁸ However, this narrative overlooks the crucial and underappreciated role played by "native agents," who were indispensable to the success and reach of the LMS.⁹ So, the "Native agency" wasn't just one type of person, but rather a group that included both educators and those skilled in religious texts. European missionaries closely monitored the work of the "native agents" (teachers and readers).¹⁰ There could be several reasons for this strict supervision. Perhaps the missionaries wanted to ensure the accuracy of the religious message being conveyed. They might have also been concerned about cultural sensitivity or potential conflicts with local traditions. Upon completion of their training, they were appointed as native agents, often receiving scanty compensation.¹¹ Gladstone¹² condemns the London Missionary Society (LMS) for neglecting the retirement needs of their "native agents" in Kerala, arguing that missionaries failed to address their crucial requirement for financial security in old age. The absence of a retirement benefits system left some agents and pastors, who dedicated their lives to the mission, struggling in their later years, as they had to beseech missionaries for basic necessities like land and money to build a home for their elderly stage. Nevertheless, it was these individuals who proved indispensable in the formation of numerous congregations. They tirelessly preached the Gospel, communicated the locals' desire to meet with the missionary, and conducted follow-up tasks subsequent to the missionary's visit.¹³ These native agents were educated locals employed by the missionaries to communicate the Christian faith within their own communities. Unlike European missionaries, native agents were fluent in local languages and deeply familiar with the cultural contexts of the villages they served. This linguistic and cultural fluency allowed them to convey Christian teachings more effectively and persuasively than foreign missionaries could. Native agents took on the role of educators, not only teaching Christianity but also often providing general education. They read Bible passages to local communities, explained their meanings, and engaged in discussions about Christian principles. Their ability to connect with people on a personal level made the message of Christianity more accessible and relatable.

These agents served as the vital link, often stationed in established congregations, acting as the primary point of contact between the LMS European missionaries and the local population.¹⁴ They maintained the day-to-day operations of the mission stations, ensuring continuity and stability in the Christian teachings and practices being introduced. While working under the guidance of European missionaries, native agents had a degree of autonomy that allowed them to adapt their methods to better fit local contexts. This supervision ensured that the teachings remained consistent with LMS doctrine, but the flexibility granted to native agents was crucial for effective communication and education. Despite their indispensable role, the contributions of native agents have often been overshadowed by the focus on European missionaries. Native agents were the ones on the front lines, engaging with local populations daily and ensuring the spread of Christianity through personal interactions and sustained educational efforts. During times of crisis, Indian agents bore the full brunt of local opposition, enduring intense mental and physical suffering from native retaliation.¹⁵ G.O. New Port once remarked, I do not know what the missionaries would do without them"¹⁶ heavily underscores the immense dependence of European missionaries on the support and collaboration of native preachers. The statement suggests that missionaries would be severely hindered or even unable to effectively spread the Gospel without the assistance of native preachers. Native preachers act as a vital bridge between the missionaries and the local population. They possess a deeper understanding of the local language, customs, and cultural nuances, which allows them to communicate the Gospel in a way that resonates with their fellow countrymen. Native preachers often enjoy a greater level of trust and acceptance within their communities compared to foreign missionaries. This allows them to access and influence people that missionaries might struggle to reach on their own. Native preachers play a crucial role in ensuring the long-term sustainability of the missionary effort. They can continue to spread the Gospel and nurture the local church even after the missionaries have departed. By using examples from their own experiences and surroundings, the preacher connects with the audience on a deeper level, fostering understanding and engagement. New Port, acknowledges¹⁷ that European missionaries, despite their efforts, might not be able to replicate the effectiveness of native preachers in using these relatable illustrations.

The native agents played a significant, albeit often overlooked, role in the history of the London Missionary Society. They were the educators and communicators who brought the message of Christianity to the villages, working under the supervision of European missionaries but with the cultural and linguistic tools that made them particularly effective. Recognizing their contributions provides a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the LMS's impact and legacy. Native missionaries are essential for the growth of Christianity in Travancore. Their support is not just beneficial but crucial for its continued development. Therefore, the London Missionary Society (LMS) employs native missionaries as catechists. These missionaries have focused significantly on training capable helpers, known as local agents, primarily from low castes. These agents gain

leadership roles among low-caste communities under the guidance of Christian missionaries. Currently, many regions where low-caste people reside require additional assistance. Native pastors are often better suited to advance evangelization in these areas because they can establish closer connections with their fellow countrymen. Samuel Mateer describes the significant growth of ordained native ministers within the London Missionary Society (LMS) in South India between 1865 and 1882. There was not a single ordained native minister in 1865.¹⁸ The fact that Vedamanikam's work as a minister is acknowledged suggests he was effective and made a positive contribution. Mateer's observation lies there's a shortage of native ministers equipped to handle the current needs of the congregation. This indicates a lack of local leadership within the LMS church in 1865. Now there are 18: This highlights a substantial increase in ordained native ministers by 1882, suggesting a growth in local leadership and potentially a larger local congregation. Their meetings for mutual consultation and united prayer are an interesting feature of the time. This emphasizes the importance of these native ministers coming together for discussion, support, and spiritual growth. It reflects strong community and collaboration, highlighting the swift growth of a local clergy within the LMS church in South India. The growth from zero to 18 ordained ministers in just 17 years is seen as a positive step, and their meetings are viewed as a sign of a strong and committed local leadership. Samuel Mateer stresses that successful missionary work in India requires employing local preachers and ministers, similar to how the apostles' appointed elders in every church. The goal is to eventually entrust the entire mission to these native leaders, ensuring the work continues and thrives independently.¹⁹ In India, native preachers are crucial and can be trained from young people and selected adult converts. European missionaries would struggle without them, and the mission's success depends on the dedication and intelligence of these local helpers.

The native Christian pastor, *upadeshi* have laboured for a long time under the LMS, and many great men, such as Vedamanikam, Rev. C. Masillamani,²⁰ George Christie,²¹ Robert Chamberlain (reader in 1822),²² John Moses,²³ Vethanayagam, Rev. S. Zacharia,²⁴ G. Raslalam,²⁵ Yesudian,²⁶ Rev. David Sylum,²⁷ Thomas Morden White,²⁸ Anbudian Devalam,²⁹ Abraham,³⁰ Willaim Fletcher,³¹ Joseph Kamalam,³² Rev. Joseph Seileyam,³³ Daniel,³⁴ Rev. A. Arumanayogam,³⁵ Rev. N. Devadasan,³⁶ Samuel Matthias,³⁷ N.R. Nathaniel,³⁸ Rev. Gnanabaranam³⁹ Rev. C. Samuel,⁴⁰ Rev. M. Nyanabranam,⁴¹ etc worked and converted many natives to Christianity through their efforts. Samuel Mateer supervised native teachers from diverse backgrounds: an ascetic, a high-caste Nair or Sudra, a Syrian Christian, and a former Pulayar slave, showing God's grace works through all. Most others were Shanar or Ilavar converts.⁴² They held esteemed positions among the Travancore ministers, renowned for their prowess as efficient pastors, skilled writers, and charismatic leaders. These unsung heroes of Travancore occasionally appear in the history of the LMS, but their contributions have left a significant impact. However, within this esteemed group, William Fletcher stands out as a genius due to his unique literary contribution. His work made him a standout figure among the already accomplished "native agents.

Willaim Fletcher (1837-1892) was born in 1837 in the village of Tittimelekonam near Christukovil.⁴³ The person's parents were Roman Catholics.⁴⁴ His Roman Catholic name was Suvisesha Muthu.⁴⁵ This was common for people who converted to Christianity during this early period. Ringeltaube, the pioneering figure, exerted efforts to convert Catholics to the Protestant faith, though his attempts met with scant success.⁴⁶ Later in 1886 LMS journal describes similar Roman Catholics in Travancore converting to Protestantism due to lack of instruction, poverty, and seeing prosperity among Protestant converts.⁴⁷ The famous missionary Samuel Mateer, talks about how William Fletcher's English name, given by someone outside his culture, posed problems in India. It was probably tough to say or spell in Indian languages and made him seem less connected to his Indian roots. Mateer suggests that meaningful Indian names would be better. William didn't pick his name; it was given by a Christian woman in Mrs. W. Fletcher Norwich⁴⁸ who helped him financially, likely in memory of her husband. Mateer warns that using English names could cause misunderstandings, like a guy who used his English name to deceive people overseas.

Rev. Joshua Knowles, in his Memoir of Rev. William Fletcher, notes that native minister William Fletcher's life is chiefly documented in an autobiography penned near his life's end.⁴⁹ The native minister's early life and upbringing, specifically focusing on the tension between his Catholic background and his eventual education in a Protestant school. He had Roman Catholic Roots, begins by establishing his origin born to devout Roman Catholic parents in a small village. His parents were deeply committed to their faith and raised him accordingly, adhering strictly to Catholic rituals and practices. There was limited education access at that time. Access to education, particularly elementary education, was scarce at that time. The sole school in the vicinity belonged to the London Mission, a Protestant organization is the only option.⁵⁰ Sending their son to a Protestant school caused significant hesitation for his Catholic parents. To counter their worries, they performed a special religious ceremony, likely a Catholic ritual, to ensure God's blessing upon their son despite the different religious environment. The minister's academic performance, a turning point in his life, and his introduction to missionary work. He was a diligent student excelling in his five-year studies, noted for his abilities and exemplary behavior. Reflecting later, Fletcher deemed this education life-changing. Exposure to new ideas, likely Protestant theology, ignited a profound metamorphosis as "the truth began to dawn upon his

mind." This new perspective led him to connect with missionaries, especially evangelist Mr. Vethamanikam.⁵¹ They likely noticed his potential and interest in their faith. Based on Mr. Vethamanikam's recommendation, Rev. J. Abbs, the district leader, admitted him to a boarding school for missionary training.⁵² His Protestant education profoundly impacted him, possibly sowing the seeds for his conversion and eventual missionary path. He received support from a pious woman, Mrs. W. Fletcher of Norwich, who likely funded his education or prayed for him.⁵³ She exhibited an exceptional interest in seeking information about him and fervently prayed for his spiritual advancement. Mr. and Mrs. Abbs, who oversaw his missionary training, treated him with kindness and offered guidance.

While describing William Fletcher's life one name also is important that is Anboo (Love, Charity) Whitchurch. Notably, Anboo, who later became the wife of William Fletcher, exhibited a deep understanding of Christian doctrines and played a pivotal role in guiding others toward faith. In describing the monthly meetings with the female church members, John Abbs⁵⁴ highlights Mrs. Abbs' interactions, focusing on religious discussions, personal experiences, and updates on the school or mission station. Mrs. Abbs also assessed the women's understanding of scripture, likely questioning their faith and experiences. Among those highly esteemed by the Abbses was Anboo, recognized for her profound respect and dedication to her faith.⁵⁵

Anboo's journey from humble beginnings to becoming a teacher vividly illustrates the transformative power of education, particularly for girls from underprivileged backgrounds. The statement written by Anboo is a message of gratitude and a testament to the power of education.⁵⁶ She opens her narrative by acknowledging her Shanar community roots and vividly recounting her humble beginnings: "I was born to idolatrous parents in Nellyraconam, a village near Neyoor in South Travancore. My father, a Palmyra tree climber, succumbed to cholera during an outbreak in the village. His death, steeped in idolatry, left us—his widow and children—destitute. According to the customs of the country at that time, the male children of the Shanar Tribe are only allowed to possess the father's property."⁵⁷ Despite having property seized by his brothers, we were compelled by custom to live with my mother's relatives at Mundaycaudu. There, my mother struggled to support us through laborious work. Our lives changed when Christianity reached our village, bringing Mission Free-schools that provided education and shelter. I was admitted to the Home Girls' school at Neyoor at age ten, sponsored by generous Christian benefactors from England. It was there, amidst these transformative circumstances, that I later miraculously survived a severe cholera outbreak." After finishing school, Anboo continues to practice her faith. In 1 November 1858, she becomes a teacher in her village, Tittemailconum. Her school, which initially had eight students as described in 1847, later expanded significantly to accommodate 15 girls and 5 boys, marking a major development.⁵⁸ It expresses gratitude for the generosity of the benefactors who made her education possible. Anboo is now giving back to her community by teaching the next generation. Following others' advice, Mr. Fletcher married this young woman named Anpoo.⁵⁹ She recounts,⁶⁰ "Following my convalescence from cholera, I remained affiliated with the school for an additional two years. Subsequently, I was wed to William Fletcher's Reader and employed as an instructor by Mrs. Mault in the Carlton Schools.⁶¹ My husband later assumed a teaching role in the same institution while also dedicating himself to preaching the Gospel." Anpoo as a worthy companion and helper throughout their lives, indicating a happy and fulfilling union. The Abbs describes Fletcher also as a Christian with zeal, devotion, and working faithfully as a servant of Jesus."⁶² They had five sons and three daughters.⁶³ Notably: All but their youngest son became missionaries, demonstrating the family's strong commitment to missionary work. Two of their daughters married missionaries, further solidifying their ties to the missionary community. The significant role Mr. Fletcher's wife and family played in supporting his missionary service. It portrays a family dedicated to spreading Christianity.

He began his missionary career as a catechist, which likely involved instructing new converts in Christian faith and doctrines. He served for ten years in various congregations across the eastern and southern parts of the district. His busy workload, which included, Preaching, Catechizing, community support, fighting injustice, Oppressive Sudra Landlords, High handed Government officials etc. Delivering sermons and religious messages. Teaching Christian doctrine, likely to new converts. Assisting his congregation during personal hardships. He actively intervened to protect his flock from, the Sudras were a higher caste known to exploit lower castes at times.⁶⁴ He challenged unfair actions by government officials. This suggests a strong sense of social justice and a willingness to advocate for his community. He possessed a friendly and outgoing personality (frank and sociable disposition). He had a remarkable singing voice, carefully honed to be the best among missionaries.⁶⁵ These talents likely made him well-liked within the community. "Christian songs" refers to devotional songs, which he used to enhance religious gatherings.

Mr. Fletcher's responsibilities expanded under the leadership of Rev. S. Mateer.⁶⁶ In 1859, Rev. S. Mateer took charge of the Pareychaley district, potentially replacing Mr. and Mrs. Abbs. Mr. Fletcher was called back to the main congregation, likely signifying a promotion or recognition of his abilities. Mateer identified William Fletcher's potential as a young catechist in a rural congregation and introduced him to broader opportunities.⁶⁷ He assumed additional responsibilities as a music teacher, instructing boarding school children in singing, and also cared for their well-being during illnesses. Between 1861 and 1862, he frequently accompanied the experienced Rev. Mateer on missionary tours to Trivandrum and Quilon missions.⁶⁸ He even

took on the temporary supervision of these missions, suggesting growing trust and confidence in his leadership skills. Mr. Fletcher's role evolved under Rev. Mateer's guidance. He received more responsibilities, including teaching, healthcare, travel assistance, and even temporary leadership, signifying his increasing importance within the missionary community. Samuel Mateer relied on native missionaries like William Flecture and other trusted local brethren as trustworthy. Men of native scholarship like William Flecture were rare among the converts, yet some proved to be highly effective and dedicated workers in the missions. Aware of this, Mateer made an honest and systematic effort to provide these men with thorough Biblical and theological training, preparing them to become future leaders in the development of the Christian Church. Mateer became a central figure, wielding significant influence among natives of all classes, particularly low-castes. However, there were also Nair and Brahmin converts who served as native pastors.

During the harrowing period of 1860-1861,⁶⁹ Samuel Mateer narrates the exemplary valor and leadership exhibited by William Fletcher amidst the throes of devastation. Fletcher's unwavering dedication to the infirm, coupled with his proactive measures in spearheading employment initiatives through road construction, epitomizes his steadfast commitment to communal welfare during times of crisis. In the face of a dire famine compounded by a rampant cholera outbreak, Fletcher, alongside his compatriot Joseph Kamalam, displays an indomitable spirit of altruism. Mateer, while expressing apprehension for their well-being amidst such dire circumstances, lauds their valiant efforts in attending to the afflicted and destitute. Fletcher emerges as a beacon of resilience and ingenuity by assuming leadership over a pivotal philanthropic endeavor: the construction of several miles of roadway.⁷⁰ This ambitious undertaking serves a dual purpose of offering gainful employment to the impoverished masses grappling with starvation and potentially fostering invaluable infrastructural advancements for the community at large. The fruition of the road project stands as a testament to Fletcher's adept stewardship, garnering unanimous acclaim and satisfaction among its beneficiaries. Most significantly, however, the initiative emerges as a lifeline for multitudes, preserving countless lives through the provision of employment opportunities and much-needed sustenance amid the ravages of famine.

Samuel Mateer, recognizing Fletcher's talent is impressed by Fletcher's beautiful singing of Indian hymns. Promoting Fletcher Mateer believing Fletcher could improve the overall singing in the mission, Mateer brings him to the main station. Mateer expanding Fletcher's role, takes on two new responsibilities. Serving as a catechist at the head station. Teaching a daily singing lesson to the children in the mission's boarding school. This also allows for closer supervision and training of Fletcher and other young teachers. To further enhance the mission's music, Mateer sends Fletcher to visit more developed music programs in Palayamkottai and Madura.⁷¹ By learning new tunes and hymns, Fletcher helps improve the singing throughout the Travancore Mission. These songs become popular and contribute to the mission's work. Samuel Mateer's recognition of William Fletcher's musical talent and his efforts to leverage that talent to improve the singing and spiritual experience within the Travancore Mission.

Mr. Fletcher's pivotal endeavors in aiding the subjugated lower castes and his subsequent ascension to eminence as a missionary. He witnessed the grievous plight of the Pariars and Puliars, denoted as "soil-slaves," languishing in abject conditions and enduring relentless subjugation by their Sudra overlords in the northern district.⁷² Mr. Fletcher, profoundly stirred by their plight, engaged in initiatives to ameliorate their suffering, devising schemes to elevate their social standing. This entailed dispatching missionaries and educators to these communities, founding schools, and resulting in 13 new Christian congregations, drawing numerous adherents from the lower castes. Mr. Fletcher's leadership in this endeavor was acknowledged. He was appointed as an evangelist in 1863,⁷³ likely signifying a promotion or recognition of his achievements in spreading Christianity. This solidified his renown as a resolute and efficient missionary, despite the initial vexations posed by Sudra masters and formidable Sirkar officials intent on impeding their mission efforts. Their tactics involved false criminal charges and lawsuits against the lower castes and missionaries who helped them. Mr. Fletcher tirelessly endeavored to extricate the innocent, proving their innocence, and to establish a harmonious understanding between opposing groups.

The L.M.S. encountered daunting challenges in Travancore due to rigid caste hierarchy⁷⁴ and pervasive, entrenched slavery. Their mission transcended mere conversion, propelled instead by a profound benevolence and an abiding love for humanity. Their objective was to emancipate individuals from the shackles of social inequality, the ravages of poverty, and the bondage of slavery. They envisioned a radically transformed world, one utterly purged of these oppressive burdens. There is no region in Travancore untouched by the presence of active missions. A large section of the populace, especially those from castes lower than the Nadars and Ezhavas, like the Pulayas, Parayas, Kuravas, and Vedar, were considered slaves by all. This made the missionaries' already difficult tasks even more difficult. Numerous authors have extensively critiqued this deplorable situation in Travancore, offering penetrating analyses of the deeply entrenched and pernicious institution of slavery alongside rigid caste restrictions.⁷⁵ These observations elucidate the multifaceted and deeply entrenched societal barriers that severely impeded the endeavors of the missionaries from the London Missionary Society. As they preached among the common people, Christian missionaries encountered slaves and learned about the horrific realities of slavery. The LMS came to identify itself closely with the Pariahs and

Pulayas, and actively championed their cause.⁷⁶ Missionaries, staunchly opposed to slavery, fervently petitioned the Rajah through letters to address the dire conditions of the slaves. Their efforts haven't borne fruit so far.⁷⁷ This indicates their strong desire to compel the Rajah to enact substantial improvements for the slaves' welfare. They championed the abolition of slavery.⁷⁸ Two centuries ago, labour was predominantly provided by slaves or serfs bound to the land, where physical labour was cheap. Slaves were treated as commodities bought and sold, encouraged by the Portuguese and Dutch along the Malabar Coast. As late as 1812,⁷⁹ British Colonel Munro found chained, starving natives at a Dutch settlement. By 1850, the price of a slave ranged from six to ten rupees, illustrating the harsh economic realities of the time. Native historian Nagam Aiya⁸⁰ notes that the spread of Christianity among lower castes significantly improved their conditions. Once they renounced their former religion, many of their caste-based disabilities disappeared. Missionaries supported their cause, helping them secure concessions and exemptions from certain taxes still imposed on their Hindu counterparts. Education also played a crucial role in their upliftment. Additionally, the missionaries, influenced by European values, advocated for the abolition of slavery. In 1849, they submitted a reform proposal to the government, inspired by British policies. By means of a series of memoranda⁸¹ and petitions, these missionaries addressed the concerns of slaves and exerted pressure on the Indian Government to promptly address this social ill. The Christian movement among the serfs of Travancore is impressive. It's helping many formerly oppressed people become noble individuals, and it's also influencing the higher castes significantly.⁸² In their campaign, the missionaries encountered vehement resistance from slaveholders and government officials.⁸³ In the history of Travancore there were several proclamations relating to this, 1812,⁸⁴ 1843, 1853,⁸⁵ 1855,⁸⁶ 1865 pandarappattom Proclamation, 1867 and Janmi-Kudiyam,⁸⁷ etc.⁸⁸ Powerful groups feared that abolishing slavery would destabilize existing economic and political hierarchies. Slaves seeking aid from the mission suffered brutal retaliation—beating, threats of job loss, and expulsion from their masters' estates. The link between conversion and slave emancipation heightened hostility toward Christianity, yet the LMS steadfastly fulfilled its duties. The King of Travancore, the Maha Rajah, had been deliberating slavery for two years, suggesting it was already a concern possibly due to internal pressures or personal convictions. The primary hurdle was persuading landowners, who feared that abolishing slavery would devastate their agricultural operations, as slaves constituted a crucial labour force.⁸⁹ The Madras Government, representing British colonial administration in South India, raised the issue of abolishing slavery in Travancore, indicating broader scrutiny and abolition of slavery in other parts of India. On this important day in Travancore's history, slavery was ultimately outlawed over several proclamations⁹⁰ in several years freeing around 136,000 slaves. The missionaries' steadfast efforts precipitated this transformation, leading to a substantial conversion of liberated slaves to Christianity over time. Rev. S. Mateer's dedication to the upliftment of Pulaya communities in South India extended beyond religious teachings. His efforts coincided with a period of social transformation, and his work empowered these communities to embrace their newfound freedom.

Mateer recounts an instance when, while visiting amongst his congregations, he heard a melodious Indian tune being sung during the service. Struck by its sweetness, he proposed that a hymn for the liberated slaves be composed to the tune he admired, specifically for the Pulayar Christians.⁹¹ Accepting the suggestion immediately, he crafted the hymn in his native tongue, Tamil.⁹² Mateer then sent this hymn to one of their magazines for publication and promptly had it translated into Malayalam for inclusion in a lyric book he was editing. Samuel Mateer, valuing the importance of a hymn celebrating slave emancipation, enlisted the esteemed native agent William Fletcher to compose a piece reflecting their journey to freedom. Fletcher composed it in Tamil, which Mateer translated into English.⁹³ Surprisingly, the Malayalam version, translated by native missionary MosavalsalaSastrikal, (1847-1916) became more popular in the Trivandrum district. The text heralds a pivotal triumph—Emancipation and Celebration—the liberation of these oppressed individuals, undoubtedly the result of unwavering missionary perseverance. Through this poem, it unveils the profound exultation of Mr. Fletcher and his congregation. It was published in the missionary magazine ("Desopakari") an illustrated Tamil magazine and its editor was Rev. Frederic Beylis.⁹⁴ In Sherwood Eddy's "India Awakening," a similar song, which Eddy termed an "old slave song," encapsulates a moment of profound personal and communal significance, intertwining the historical echoes of enslavement with the transformative power of divine grace as perceived by the author. Eddy, a Christian missionary, describes his departure from a "great church" where he encounters a similar local folk song. This song, according to Eddy, epitomizes the transformative impact of God's grace on the community.⁹⁵ Eddy refers to the song as telling "its own tale," indicating that the lyrics or the spirit of the song conveys a narrative or message that resonates deeply with the community. This narrative is one of "marvelous uplifting power," suggesting themes of hope, transformation, and spiritual renewal. Eddy attributes the positive changes and uplifting experiences in the community to the grace of God. This underscores a key missionary perspective: the belief that divine intervention and Christian faith bring about significant improvements in individuals' and communities' lives. It highlights the profound nexus between the enduring legacy of historical anguish and the rejuvenating currents of spiritual revitalization. Missionary elements were diligently engaged in the eradication of caste-based inequality, employing various

methods to achieve their objective. Consequently, a door has been opened, the unsealing of which he exults with jubilant song.

"Our slave work is done, our slave bonds are gone,

For this, we shall never henceforth forsake Thee, O Jesus!"

To purchase cattle, fields, houses, and many luxuries (we were sold);

(Now) Messiah himself has settled in the land a people who once fled in terror.

The father was sold to one place, the mother to another' the children also separated. But now

The owners who enslaved us often caused us much suffering:

But will it comfort us to relate all the oppressions in full?

After exhaustion with labour in burning heat, in rain and cold and dew,

They beat us cruelly, with thousands of strokes.

Dogs might enter streets, markets, courts, and lands; (but) if we went near, they beat and chased us to a distance

As unclean lepers must run and hide in the jungles, so we outcastes must leave the road after warning those who approach. But now

As the Lord freed from slavery the much-suffering Israelites in Egypt,

The hymn declared "AdimavelaOzhinjunammude..." ("Our slavery is over; there is no more slave-work").⁹⁶ The lyrics, pulsating with emotion, provide a poignant insight into their experiences as depicted in Samuel Mateer's "Native Life in Travancore."⁹⁷ This segment highlights Mr. Fletcher's compassion, leadership, and unwavering advocacy for the oppressed, cementing his reputation as a revered figure in the missionary community through his successful efforts to enhance their lives and champion their freedom. William Fletcher's songs in Tamil intricately weave historical events into their themes, bestowing these compositions with considerable historical significance.

The lyrics attribute the transformation to Christian missionaries and underscore the importance of education and faith, echoing the prevailing sentiments of the region's cultural norms. The song concludes with a call to action, urging the community to embrace Christianity and live a righteous life. Slave caste conversion wasn't solely driven by socio-economic factors, but also by a genuine search for spiritual liberation and a transformative experience offered by Protestant Christianity. Samuel Mateer observed that in documenting instances of slave castes embracing Christianity, the profound impact of the Gospel extended beyond mere social mobility, suggesting deeper spiritual motivations and transformations among these communities. While acknowledging the prevalent social and economic hardships faced by these communities, this hypothesis posits that their conversion was driven by a deeper disillusionment with existing religious practices and a yearning for a more egalitarian faith that resonated with their spiritual aspirations. The song "Our slave work is done; our slave bonds are gone" resonates as a resounding anthem of liberation among the newly Christianized lower caste converts. It articulates their newfound freedom from the oppressive chains of physical labour and societal subjugation. The opening lines exult in the cessation of their enslavement,⁹⁸ emphasizing their release from the toilsome burdens of servitude and ownership.

The song starkly states "sold like cattle," encapsulating the dehumanizing reality of being treated as mere possessions. It emphasizes how enslaved individuals were commodified, bought and sold for land, homes, and luxuries, akin to the separation of families depicted in verse 3 of the song during slave auctions. In 1883, A.F. Painter's article about the Pulayas compared to an 1850 account described enslaved individuals as treated like property, bought and sold like cattle, enduring severe mistreatment, and denied basic human rights by their owners.⁹⁹ The several historical proclamations of Travancore marked significant strides towards emancipation in Travancore, aiming to improve conditions for formerly enslaved communities. Despite these reforms, challenges persisted, as evidenced by reports of ongoing oppression and widespread unawareness of emancipation in eastern districts.

"The dogs roaming freely in public spaces could be symbolic, representing the freedom of movement enjoyed by upper castes, while the humans being chased away symbolize the restrictions imposed on lower castes. Dogs, considered unclean animals in some Hindu traditions, have unrestricted access to public spaces, highlighting the limited movement and lack of freedom experienced by lower castes. The fact that even animals like dogs enjoy more freedom than humans underscores the absurdity of the caste system. Being chased away like animals further dehumanizes lower castes, emphasizing their treatment as less than human by upper castes. The comparison to dogs underscores their ongoing struggle for social equality and freedom of movement. This line about dogs serves as a powerful image that reinforces the song's message." "In 1883, A.F. Painter's description¹⁰⁰ vividly depicts the harsh realities faced by lower caste individuals in Travancore: they were barred from public roads, markets, and shops, compelled to visibly announce their presence and withdraw in the presence of higher castes. They also faced obstacles in securing housing and accessing public services like ferry-boats. These systematic practices highlight deep-rooted caste discrimination, profoundly restricting their social mobility and economic opportunities."

Their fervent pledge to Jesus reflects profound gratitude and an unwavering commitment to their newfound faith, which they attribute to their emancipation. The song vividly recalls the hardships of their past, depicting the grim realities of being treated as commodities, torn from their families, and subjected to brutal mistreatment and social ostracism. A transformative shift occurs as they embrace Christianity, no longer marginalized and forced into hiding but empowered by their newfound faith. Drawing parallels to the biblical exodus,¹⁰¹ the song suggests divine intervention in their liberation, crediting Christian missionaries for their emancipation. Education emerges as a vital tool for empowerment, with the missionary providing literacy, numeracy, and spiritual teachings, offering a pathway to a brighter future. The song culminates in a call to action, urging the community to embrace Christianity en masse, promoting unity and righteous living as they walk the path of renewal. Overall, the song stands as a testament to the transformative impact of Rev. S. Mateer's missionary endeavors, illustrating how Christianity not only offered spiritual comfort but also paved the way for social upliftment and empowerment among the Low caste communities. This song stands as a profound testament to the catalytic influence of Rev. S. Mateer's endeavours. It showcases how Christianity offered not just spiritual solace but also a powerful tool for social empowerment for the Low caste communities. The songs explore the poignant themes of suffering and oppression endured by enslaved individuals, vividly depicting their harsh realities within oppressive systems. They draw on religious references, seeking solace and hope in God amid their trials. Moreover, they articulate a deep yearning for freedom and liberation, embodying the enduring human pursuit of dignity and autonomy in the face of adversity.

William Fletcher excelled not only in the field of song but also in the realm of faith. In 1884,¹⁰² Reverend Joseph Seileyam's letter recounts a vibrant communion service at Neyattinkara chapel in Trivandrum, India, attended by 180 church members and 380 Christians. Native missionaries Reverend Joseph Kamalam and Reverend W. Fletcher delivered sermons on Luke 10:25-37, with Fletcher focusing on "The Good Samaritan."¹⁰³ He also administered Communion, contributing significantly to the uplifting and transformative atmosphere of the service. The occasion underscored the community's commitment to faith, fellowship, and moral integrity, evident in the baptism of four adults and five children and the spiritual renewal of 80 individuals.

Mr. Fletcher's work continued under new leadership and ultimately led to his ordination as a missionary. Rev. Newport¹⁰⁴ replaced Rev. Mateer as the district leader.¹⁰⁵ The new leader enthusiastically pursued the task among the lower castes, a cause championed by his predecessor.¹⁰⁶ Under the auspices of Newport's new administration, a multitude of educational institutions prospered. The overseer himself noted that even the most punctilious Brahmin might have found the performance exceptionally commendable, provided he could temporarily disregard the fact that the reciters were not only female but also of a lower caste.¹⁰⁷ The passage emphasizes Mr. Fletcher's dedicated assistance to Rev. Newport. He faithfully and energetically carried out the new leader's instructions. Impressed by Mr. Fletcher's service ("a token of his appreciation"), Rev. Newport provided him with private theology lessons for a year. This suggests grooming him for a more significant role. Based on Rev. Newport's recommendation and likely due to his qualifications and experience, the District Committee ordained Mr. Fletcher as a native assistant missionary¹⁰⁸ in 1867.¹⁰⁹ William Fletcher is officially ordained as an assistant missionary, signifying a step up in his role within the mission hierarchy. He relocates to a village within his designated division, remaining close to Pareychaley.¹¹⁰ Rev. William Fletcher, who served as the Assistant Missionary of Parassala until 1892. Fletcher continued his missionary work in this village until his death. Together with his colleague, Joseph Kamalam,¹¹¹ who oversaw the other half of the district, they were considered the pillars of the mission's work in Pareychaley. His promotion and continued service alongside Joseph Kamalam solidified their roles as key figures supporting the mission's work in the Pareychaley district. This marks a significant milestone in his career, formally recognizing him as a leader within the mission. Overall, this part highlights Mr. Fletcher's continued dedication and leadership, which earned him the respect of his superiors and ultimately led to his ordination as a full-fledged missionary.

Mr. Fletcher's significant role in supporting the district missionaries. Overseeing the overall running of missionary communities. Finding suitable locations for building places of worship. Managing the building process of chapels. Settling conflicts and disagreements within the communities. Performing religious ceremonies. Organizing and conducting gatherings focused on missionary work. Preaching informative and thought-provoking messages. Leading the community in prayer. Occasionally traveling to other districts to preach and spread the missionaries' message. To effectively fulfil these duties, Mr. Fletcher actively studied the Bible and other religious texts in Tamil to deepen his knowledge and connect with the local community.

Mr. Fletcher's dedication to his missionary work and the additional way his medical knowledge helped him connect with the community. Mr. Fletcher learned traditional medical practices,¹¹² even though it came with some personal challenges (possibly the difficulty of learning or the toll it took on his time). He believed this skill would be helpful to his work, meaning it would allow him to connect with people on a deeper level. He offered his medical services freely. This likely fostered trust and appreciation within the community. He used these medical interactions as opportunities to share a few words about the Saviour, presumably referring to Jesus Christ. Even during epidemics, when people were afraid, Mr. Fletcher responded to calls for help, even in the middle of the night. This selfless act likely demonstrated his genuine care for the community. In some

situations, people fled in fear deserting the remains of the deceased. Mr. Fletcher hastened to the spot and arranged for the proper burial of the dead.¹¹³ This showed great respect and compassion. All these actions resulted in great influence for good. Even rich heathen Sudra landlords, a potentially resistant social class, were willing to listen to his words. This demonstrates the respect and trust he earned through his medical service and compassion. Mr. Fletcher's willingness to learn and use his medical knowledge alongside his religious beliefs allowed him to build stronger connections with the community, ultimately furthering his missionary work.

William Fletcher vehemently opposed the practice of caste among Christians as well. As the number of converts from the lowest castes increased, trouble occurred in the LMS churches as well, though the LMS missionaries seem to have been determined not to allow caste distinctions. In 1871 William Fletcher, wrote that: Caste has given us much trouble. The old converts from the shanar castes had not the least will to admit the Pariahs and Puliahs in to their chapels but this year the Rev. J.E. Jones adopted various measures to remove this evil. Already it has been greatly remedied and there is no doubt that sooner or later it will altogether take its flight.¹¹⁴ Fletcher noticed the challenges faced by the London Mission Society (LMS) churches in Travancore due to the caste system. He thus noticed the existing social hierarchy based on caste. "Shanar" castes considered themselves superior to "Pariahs" and "Puliahs" and resisted sharing church spaces. It shows some success in tackling this issue. The specific measures taken by Rev. J.E. Jones involved promoting teachings of equality within the Christian faith and potentially implementing changes within church practices. Samuel Mateer, in his observations, articulated the pernicious nature of caste distinctions and vehemently opposed their dehumanizing implications. His writings reflect a strong moral and ethical stance against these oppressive social stratifications.

Reverend W. Fletcher, a respected native minister in the Travancore Mission. Reverend Fletcher's death is a significant loss for the Pareychaley district and the entire Travancore Mission. During some time, Rev. Joshua Knowles was appointed as the first resident missionary in Quilon in 1880, addressing the previous lack of a dedicated missionary in the area. From 1883 to 1884, he also oversaw the Trivandrum District. In 1890, he was transferred from Quilon to Parassala, where he was assisted by Joseph Kamalam and notably by William Fletcher. Rev. Knowles was especially committed to aiding the blind, with Fletcher playing a significant role in these efforts.¹¹⁵

Thus, Mr. Fletcher continued to fulfil the duties of his post successfully for twenty-five years, and completely ran out the oil of his existence to its very last drop in the cause of Christ. The man was healthy: Despite working in areas prone to malaria, he remained free from most illnesses for 30 years. On November 4th, 1892, he woke up early for prayer but became unconscious shortly after entering a room. Both a local apothecary (pharmacist) and Dr. Fry tried to treat him. His wife, a missionary friend, relatives (mission agents), and other friends were by his side. The illness is identified as apoplexy, an old term for stroke. Rev. William Fletcher, assistant missionary in the Pareychaley district, died on the 4th November 1892.¹¹⁶ He died at 58, having served his religious cause for 40 years. He is survived by his wife, three daughters, and five sons. One of his sons is a high achiever in the Medical Mission Class at Neyoor. His funeral is being attended by many great men. Many people attended, including religious leaders from the district (Rev. Hacker), Dr. Fry, other missionaries (Rev. Emlyn, Rev. Kamalam), and mission agents. This large gathering shows the respect he commanded.

His character is widely praised as deeply religious, honest, morally upright, truthful, sincere, moderate in habits without indulging in alcohol or drugs, modest, non-arrogant, peace-seeking, and adept at persuading others through reasoned arguments. A senior missionary specifically commends his integrity, noting the absence of any anonymous complaints—a contrast to his peers.¹¹⁷ This emphasizes his good relationships with colleagues. His passing evokes profound sorrow and a heartfelt wish for God to raise up missionaries of similar calibre in the future. Samuel Mateer observed that some converts from Catholicism were particularly devout, possibly due to their prior religious training, suggesting that William Fletcher's strong faith and preaching resonated with them. He also acknowledged the effectiveness of preachers like Fletcher, who did not necessarily speak English.¹¹⁸ This emphasizes that language isn't the sole factor in being a good missionary. He concludes by stating the Mission needs "men of all stamps" – people with different strengths and backgrounds. Overall, William Fletcher is depicted as an ideal missionary embodying the Mission's sought-after qualities, underscoring the significance of diverse talents and steadfast faith, yet also lamenting the void left by his passing.



Rev. William Fletcher is interred at Abbs Memorial Church Cemetery in Parassala. His successor diligently maintained and restored the site, ensuring it remains a well-kept and respectful resting place.

Conclusion

In subsequent history, the relentless efforts of these missionary groups starkly exposed the higher castes to the severe consequences of their longstanding neglect of the outcaste communities. One expert local historian of the time asserts,¹¹⁹ "The missionaries, through their writings, can make the world believe that terrible persecutions against Christianity are carried on in Travancore." However, the reality is more complex. They resolutely declined to engage in the time-honored 'ulium' services. In response, the high-caste individuals resolved to steadfastly defend these traditional customs. The missionaries, wielding significant influence, provided unwavering support to their adherents. These escalating tensions ultimately culminated in the conflicts known as the "dress disturbances."¹²⁰ Missionaries advocated for the lower castes, such as the Nadars and Parayars, highlighting the severe hardships they faced. They brought these issues to the attention of the British government, leveraging their influence to exert pressure on the Travancore administration. This advocacy could be perceived as support for these marginalized communities. Yet, the missionaries' portrayal of the situation might have been exaggerated, depicting the challenges as "terrible persecutions." This exaggeration served a dual purpose. On one hand, it drew international attention and sympathy, strengthening their position. On the other hand, it strategically facilitated conversions to Christianity. By aligning themselves with the oppressed lower castes, the missionaries gained their trust and loyalty, thereby increasing the likelihood of conversions. Thus, the missionaries' actions were likely driven by a combination of genuine concern for the plight of the lower castes and a strategic effort to expand their religious influence. While the missionaries might have used the issue strategically, the underlying social injustice against lower castes was very real. Their actions, even if with an ulterior motive, likely helped put pressure on the Travancore government for some level of reform. It's important to consider the missionaries' perspective. They might have genuinely believed the persecution was worse than it was. The reality of the persecution faced by lower castes in Travancore is a well-documented historical fact. The missionaries drew attention to this pervasive oppression, thereby potentially ameliorating conditions for these marginalized communities. Through their advocacy, they highlighted the severe injustices endured by the Nadars, Parayars, and other lower castes, compelling the British authorities to intervene. This intervention may have served to mitigate some of the egregious abuses inflicted upon these groups, thus providing a measure of support against systemic discrimination.

The L.M.S missionaries rendered invaluable services in promoting education, abolishing slavery, and securing freedom and equality in the region. Their mission extended beyond spreading the gospel; they dedicated themselves to the upliftment of the oppressed. The origins of modern pillow lace-making are credited to Mrs. Mault¹²¹ of the London Mission Society, who initiated instruction among impoverished women and girls of the Mission in Nagercoil¹²² in 1821.¹²³ Before the abolition of slavery, missionaries offered a beacon of hope to young enslaved girls by teaching them the valuable skill of lacemaking, a craft that could potentially buy their freedom.¹²⁴ Lace¹²⁵ was a prized and expensive commodity during that time. Several women from the slave caste, previously educated at the boarding school where they acquired the skill of lace-making, submitted

exemplars of their craftsmanship to the London Exhibition. Their work was met with considerable admiration, earning a medal for its exquisite execution.¹²⁶ By learning this skill, the girls could create items to sell and potentially earn enough money to buy their freedom. The enslaved girls would still need their enslaver's permission to sell their lace and potentially gain freedom. While not a widespread solution, the mission's actions represent a fight against the brutality of slavery. It offered a ray of hope and a chance at freedom for some enslaved girls. This can be seen as a form of empowerment. The mission equipped the girls with a means to potentially escape slavery. It wasn't a guaranteed path, but it offered a chance at freedom through hard work and talent.

Missionaries were the first to speak out against the long-standing practice of slavery in Kerala. The Christian converts predominantly hailed from marginalized communities, typically comprising tenants and laborers subjugated to the high-caste Hindus. Despite any potential hidden agendas, it was their efforts that ultimately led to the abolition of slavery in the region. Prior to this, no religion in Kerala had actively protested against slavery on such a significant scale. Several modern writers explore the idea that lower castes in India converted to Islam to escape the rigid social hierarchy of Hinduism.¹²⁷ Numerous accounts by esteemed writers have corroborated this assertion.¹²⁸ In Parassala, these activities transformed South Travancore's history and lifestyle, driving progress in all areas. Rev. William Fletcher, as an Assistant Missionary in Parassala until 1892, epitomized these values, contributing significantly to the region's advancement and leaving a lasting legacy. He documented the past experiences of the slave castes, which became a significant event in Kerala's history. The revelation of their stories and struggles reshaped the region's perception of its social fabric and injustices.

The context of the Channar Revolt and slavery abolition is crucial to understanding William Fletcher's "Amelioration of the Slave Caste" song. The Channars were a low caste in South India who faced severe oppression and restrictions. The revolt was a response to these injustices, particularly forced labor and demands for higher taxes. The British Empire was gradually moving towards abolishing slavery during this period. This growing sentiment against slavery would have likely influenced public opinion in India. "Amelioration" means improvement. So, the song likely advocated for improving the conditions of the "slave caste," possibly the Channars and other low castes. Christian converts felt unfairly treated (grievances) by the government (Dewan).¹²⁹ They bypassed the local ruler (Maharaja) and appealed to the higher British authority (Governor of Madras) for a solution. This pressure eventually led to a royal announcement (proclamation) for social reforms. Considering the historical context, the song might have: Supported the Channar Revolt: By highlighting the injustices they faced, Fletcher could have been urging reform or even abolition of their caste-based servitude. The song might have aimed to raise awareness about the plight of the "slave caste" and garner support for their amelioration (improvement). The song celebrates liberation from slavery, likely referencing the plight of a specific "slave caste." It expresses immense gratitude towards Jesus, implying a connection between newfound freedom and religious faith. This signifies the end of forced labour and oppression. The lyrics then delve into the past horrors of slavery – being sold like cattle, families torn apart, and enduring harsh treatment. It highlights the cruelty and humiliation they faced. The song contrasts their past with the present freedom. The line "Messiah himself has settled in the land a people who once fled in terror" suggests a spiritual leader or savior has brought about their liberation. The final lines express immense gratitude to Jesus, implying their newfound freedom is a divine intervention. They reference the Israelites being freed from slavery in Egypt by God, drawing a parallel to their own situation. The song could be sung by members of the "slave caste" who were recently freed, possibly after the Channar Revolt or through some other means. The reference to Jesus suggests a connection to Christianity, which might have offered them hope for liberation and social equality. Overall, the song is a powerful expression of liberation and faith. It celebrates freedom from oppression and expresses gratitude for a higher power who brought about their liberation. William Fletcher remained in those days of slavery, and through his painful experiences, he intimately understood the horrors of bondage. Many feel deep gratitude to God for the significant transformation in their social status, and that is the essence of his song. William Fletcher proclaims that the institution of slavery has been indelibly eradicated; however, this prodigious feat was achieved only after a protracted sequence of grueling contests. It was through the indefatigable endeavors of illustrious figures in subsequent years that individuals of inferior social standing progressively obtained sundry rights. This triumph serves as an emblem, not of a solitary conquest, but of the aggregate of manifold, fiercely contested struggles spearheaded by missionaries. Before missionaries arrived in Travancore in 1806, the lower castes suffered from danger, oppression, and lack of education. The missionaries' arrival marked a turning point: they prepared the groundwork for liberation from caste oppression, established boarding schools, and promoted education for all, including females. This revolutionary change allowed women to become teachers, breaking societal barriers and transforming Travancore into a society where education and freedom were accessible to all.

End Note

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