

**THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE TRADITION
OF THE PASSION PLAY IN SRI LANKA**

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Declaration of the candidate

“The work described in this thesis was carried out by me under the supervision of Professor Tissa Kariyawasam and a report on this has not been submitted in whole or in part to any university or any other institution for another Degree/Diploma”.



Signature of the Candidate

17.08.2008

Date

“I certify that the above statement made by the candidate is true and that this thesis is suitable for submission to the University for the purpose of evaluation”.

Handwritten signature in Sinhala script

Signature of the Supervisor

Date 17/08/08



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ABSTRACT

The origin and development of the tradition of the Passion play in Sri Lanka.

The tradition of the Passion play has existed in Sri Lanka for over three centuries. Its origin or the root is not to be found in the island. Although liturgical drama was well established in their own country, it has not brought into the island by the Portuguese missionaries who came in to the country in the 16th century. It was only during the Dutch period that the advent of the Passion plays to Sri Lanka took place. During that time the rich Passion play tradition that already existed in Europe came to Asia, particularly through the initiative of the Jesuit missionaries. Two prominent Oratorian missionaries who came to Sri Lanka from Goa, India were Frs. Joseph Vas and Jacome Gonsalves. They were students of St. Paul's Jesuit University and had the knowledge and the skill of the Passion plays. It was with them the tradition was inaugurated in Sri Lanka.

Fr. Jacome Gonsalves being a scholar and a skilful poet and a literary hero, he had composed the *Dukprapthi Prasangaya* and the *Desana Navaye Pasan Pota* which provided material for Passion plays carried out with statues. A critical study of these materials reveals that they have a sound theological and Biblical foundation in them. At the same time they constitute a form of popular devotion called para-liturgies. The Passion play and singing of *pasan* help them to experience the important events in the life of Jesus, such as his passion, death and resurrection.

Subsequently, Passion plays were performed in different parts of Sri Lanka using the books of Fr. Gonsalves. They were read instead of dialogues, while statues were used for the characters of the play. During the liturgical season of Lent, which is a period of forty days from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday such pious exercises took a prominent place in Christian communities. K. Lawrence Perera's Passion play at Boralessa gave a new turn to the Passion play tradition by using live actors for the first time in 1923. As a talented dramatist and musician he employed new techniques in his Passion play. He had been to the world famous Oberammergau Passion play village in Germany and had taken the Oberammergau play as his model at Boralessa. A comparative study of these two Passion plays of Boralessa and Oberammergau reveals that.

The traditional Passion plays that existed in the island and the Boralessa Passion play paved the way for the spread of the same tradition elsewhere. Among them Duwa, Pitipana, Kalaeliya, Wadduwa, Halpe, Kandawala, Ja Ela, Kalamulla, Pallansena, Pamunugama, Wattala and Kandana Passion plays occupy a prominent place.

FATHER ANTHONY FERNANDOPULLE

ABBREVIATIONS

BAL	: Biblioteca da Ajuda, Lisbon
CALR	: Ceylon Antiquary and Literary Register, Colombo.
cf.	: compare
ed.	: editor
edn.	: edition
eds.	: editors
<i>ibid</i>	: Same page referred to
JCBRAS	: Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society
Jn.	: Gospel according to John
Lk.	: Gospel according to Luke.
Mk.	: Gospel according to Mark
Mt.	: Gospel according to Matthew
no.	: number
NT	: New Testament
<i>op. cit.</i>	: book referred to previously
OT.	: Old Testament
p.	: page
pp.	: pages
tr.	: translation
vol.	: volume
v.	: verse
vv	: verses

INTRODUCTION

Christianity was brought to Sri Lanka in its Roman Catholic form and nurtured here under the protection of the Portuguese. This form of Christianity was persecuted under the Dutch conquerors who introduced the Dutch “Reformed” form, and then tolerated and later supported by the British. It has grown and spread in the island with a foreign character and an alien image. Today, more than 500 years after its ‘implantation’ in Sri Lanka, the Catholic Church is the largest Christian denomination in the country with a membership of over a million.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) initiated the serious task of ‘re-discovering the true image’ of the Church *vis-à-vis* national contexts. The process of change was referred to as ‘adaptation’. Later the notion of adaptation was broadened and more dynamic concepts were proposed, such as indigenization, inculturation, localization, contemporization and contextualisation.¹ A striking feature in post-Vatican II ecclesiastical life and theology is the evolving process of indigenization. At different levels, efforts are made today to promote this process in the areas of liturgy, religious language and pious activities. Singing of *pasan*, carols and performance of Passion plays are such pious activities.

Much of the material available for this study is written in the Sinhala language; my thesis therefore, serves to make these Sinhala or Sri Lankan materials available to a wider English-language readership. All English-language quotations from the plays in this thesis are my

1. Buhlmann, W. *The Coming of the Third Christ*, Orbis Books, New York, 1978, p. 407.

own translations from the Sinhala language. This body of translation is in itself a contribution: it makes the extraordinary range of Sinhala Passion plays such as the Passion play of Boralessa, accessible to the English-speaking world.

The tradition of the Passion play has existed in Sri Lanka for past few centuries. Yet a substantial analysis or comparative study has not been done on this subject. In addition to that I have a personal interest in this area of study. I am also aware that a conducive atmosphere has been created for this study through local and foreign schools of Passion plays. I am of the opinion that by using such sources available an in depth study could be carried out.

The methodology I have used for this study is research tours, interviews, literature surveys and manuscripts. The study tour I made to the Passion village of Oberammergau in Germany for this purpose was enlightening. The literature and the pictures I collected reveal the superb or unique quality of the Passion play. I have also interviewed the prominent people who actively participated and organized the Passion plays at Duwa, Pitipana, Boralessa, Pamunugama, Kandawala and Halpe. Most of the main actors of the above plays are still contributing to this tradition of Passion plays in their respective areas. I have in my possession the manuscripts of Boralessa and Kandawala Passion plays and attach the former as an appendix to the thesis since I have done a detailed comparative study of it with that of the script of Oberammergau Passion play. As far as the literary survey is concerned the relevant books

in Sinhala and English are available to carry out the research work. The literary works of Fr. Jacome Gonsalves are of tremendous importance for the study since he is still hailed as the father of the Passion play tradition in Sri Lanka. All the Sinhala works of Fr. Jacome Gonsalves are well preserved in three volumes in the form of micro films in the Biblioteca da Ajuda Library in Lisbon. My visit to the same library in Portugal enabled me to complete my personal collection of his literary works. I have also easy access to the relevant books, magazines, articles and encyclopedia. However, I foresee certain limitations to the research such as limiting of Passion plays to certain areas and a particular period called the Christian liturgical season of Lent which is period of forty days or sometimes to the Holy Week which is a period of seven days beginning from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday. Geographically, they are also limited to certain Western coastal maritime areas.

Most of the Christian literature and Passion plays are dedicated to depiction the life of Jesus Christ. Christians often recall the important events in the life of Jesus such as his birth, death and resurrection. The Christian liturgical calendar too is organized to commemorate these events in a cycle adding the Pentecost, the descent of the Holy Spirit, the centre of which is the outcome of the aforementioned events. The season of Advent is a preparatory period for Christmas, and Lent for the Passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. These unique events in his life have an effect on the lives of the faithful and create a culture. Undoubtedly, Christian liturgy, customs and feasts were major sources of the literature and the other arts of the West. During the season of Lent which is a period of forty

days from Ash Wednesday to Palm Sunday, the tradition of Passion plays and singing of *pasan* are well established and popular in Sri Lanka.¹ *Passo* or *Pasku* evolved from the Portuguese language. The Portuguese word *passo*² means a statue or a picture depicting the passion of Jesus.

Christian missionaries who came to Sri Lanka in the Portuguese period would have been familiar with religious drama of Portugal, Spain and other European countries. The *autos*³ or dramatic compositions of the Portuguese dramatist and poet Gil Vicente (1470-1536), and his Spanish counterpart, the prolific playwright, Lope de Vega (1562-1635), were certainly known to them. In fact, the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were a period of great activity in Europe in the production of both religious and secular drama. The Mystery plays and Miracle plays, which originated in the liturgy of the Church and were first performed in the church itself, later drifted into the city squares and became so popular that special associations, the Comfreries, were formed to organize them.⁴ Some plays assumed enormous proportions both in regard to length and the size of the cast.

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1. Ariyaratna, S. *Karol, Pasan, Kantharu*, Supasan Education service Publishers, Colombo, 1987, p. 111.
 2. Pilendran, G. *Tamil Catholic Literary Tradition of Sri Lanka*, Luxsu Graphics, Colombo, 1998, p. 52.
 3. Goonathileka, M.H. *Sinhala Nadagam Ha Damila Kuththu*, Volume I, S. Godage & Brothers, Colombo, 1999, p. 31.
 4. *Ibid* p.27.