

38

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

Rev. Dr. Anthony Fernandopulle.

The Passion play tradition as an organized and well-structured form of drama has originated in Europe. The composition and production of religious plays began even before the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The mystery plays drew their inspiration from the colourful Ester liturgy celebrated in the Church. It is said that all evidence points to Ester as the festival with which the earliest religious dramas were mostly intimately connected. Consequently, these plays highlight Jesus' passion, death and resurrection as narrated in the Gospels rather than his early life or public ministry. They were enacted during the period of lent, they were referred to *passos*, *passo* meaning 'pious exercise' practiced on Good Friday.

Portuguese missionaries launched their mission work in Goa and in Sri Lanka during this period of theatrical creativity, and it is therefore, quite natural that the Portuguese plays made an impact here. In Sinhala and Tamil, Passion plays are called *Pasku*, from the Portuguese *Pascoa*, and they were composed in both those languages. As Sarachchandra explains:

"The Roman Catholic Passion play, or *Pasku*, as it is called, ought to be considered together with Sinhalese puppet play. The *Pasku* originated, like the *nadagama*, in the Catholic areas of Jaffna, and migrated in a similar way, the Sinhala-speaking Catholic parts along the west coast."¹

Scriptural and liturgical events were dramatized in the Passion plays for the purpose of catechetical instruction. These factors were the source, origin and the cause of evolution of the religious plays.

The liturgy of the Church is so arranged as to bring before the minds of people in an annual cycle the principal events in the life of Jesus, and of Mary his mother and of the saints in a subordinate degree. As far as worship and piety in the Church is concerned, the faithful have the liturgy and para-liturgy. In the liturgy of the Church one finds the events of the life of Jesus enacted through ceremonies which laid out by the Church minutely. The Second Vatican Council expresses itself on the subject of liturgy as follows:

"The liturgy is rightly seen as an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ. It involves the presentation of man's sanctification under the guise of signs perceptible by the senses and its accomplishment in ways appropriate to each of these signs. In its full public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the head and his members. From this it follows that every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the Priest and of his Body, which is the Church is a sacred action surpassing all others. No other action of the Church can equal its efficacy by the same title and to the same degree."²

Parallel to the liturgy of the Church people have created Para-Liturgies through popular means like drama, carols, *pasan* etc. in order to understand the mysteries of their faith. One of the popular Para-liturgies is Passion plays based on the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The Origin of liturgical drama

"The primary constituents of drama are dialogue and representation. Both are present in liturgy, as they were present in the happenings which the liturgy records. The Mass is the *mimesis*³ and the elaboration of its ritual was the first step towards a Christian theatrical art. The sanctuary, however primitive, was a stage, and the faithful, however few, were audience as well as actor. The play was at once a ceremony in which they took part and a spectacle at which they assisted. From these germs the Christian theatre, almost inevitably, was born. The central events in the Christian economy of redemption were both narrative and act; and the sacred ministers, day by day, retold from scripture and, where necessary, underlined in homily the things that they were representing. Just as in the Mass itself narrative and petition become fused into pure act and strict imitation, so Christian drama developed as a commentary before it discovered its native form."⁴

In monasteries, where liturgy was performed with great solemnity and splendor, dramatic embellishments were used to heighten the effect. For instance, in the Middle Ages, in several churches in France, an interesting ceremony took place on the feast of the Epiphany: Three of the clergy, wearing copes and crowns to represent the three kings met before the High Altar, each accompanied by a servant bearing his gift. Then they proceeded to a side altar, where the figures of the Mother and Child. Before this presentation, the Kings prostrated and presented their gifts. Their example was followed by the clergy and the congregation, with additional offering. All this took place during the Mass, generally at the offertory.⁵

Paving the way for the development of religious drama.

As time went on, the dramatic representations were enacted in front of the church before or after Mass. Thus began the Miracle plays, the Mysteries and Moralities of the Middle Ages, the first developed Christian drama in Europe. In India, too, the beginning of drama is generally traced to the dramatic rituals connected with Vedic hymns and dialogues, and the cult of Crishna.⁶ There was dramatic material in the legends of other gods and in the great epics, like the *Maha-Bharata* and the *Ramayana*. From the second century A.D. onwards drama in India attained its maturity under the influence of Asvaghosha, Bhasa and Kalidasa.⁷

In Sri Lanka, however, drama does not find a place in the classical literature of the Sinhala, although there were dramatic elements in the folk religion, in the *Jataka* Stories and the history of the country. However, these were not dramas in the proper sense. The ascetical ideals of the Buddhist monks, who were the creators of classical literature in Sri Lanka, did not favour poetry and drama, which were considered inferior forms of art.

The use of visual media such as symbolic gestures and signs for the purpose of conveying ideas and messages is as old as mankind. Mimicking actions for entertainment or information led to the evolution of the drama. In some societies the drama became also a genre of their literature. Modern education sees in play-acting an effective audio-visual medium of instruction. It is a noteworthy fact that from the earliest times of the introduction of Christianity into Sri Lanka, the drama was made use of as a medium for catechetical instruction. This fact is of added significance when viewed against the background of the traditional culture of the country which did not have a literary drama due to the puritanic character of Theravada Buddhism which influenced Sri Lankan culture. There have been, however, some crude forms of folk drama,⁸ particularly the demon rituals, fertility rituals and mask dance dramas which drew inspiration from popular Buddhism.

It was under Catholic influence that drama, in the European sense of the term, in Sri Lanka was born. During the first half of the sixteenth century, the Franciscan monks arrived in Sri Lanka; they were the first Christian missionaries. Later the Jesuit Fathers, the Dominicans and the Augustinians began missionary work in the island. They came from Portugal, where, at that time, much enthusiasm prevailed for the staging of plays written on Christian themes.

Evolution of the Sinhala dramatic tradition in Sri Lanka

Visual media such as symbolic gestures and signs provide perhaps the earliest evidence for religiosity in human history. The innate human qualities of speech, song, dance and acting manifest themselves in individual behavior and in an organized form in group behavior. The mimicking of actions for entertainment or information led to the evolution of drama, and with the development and establishment of economic conditions, social relations and progress in literacy, the organized form developed into folk plays and then dramas of literary and cultural value. Drama then became a genre of the literature in some societies. The New American Encyclopedia describes the term as follows:

“Drama, in the generally accepted sense, is a composition in prose or poetry, usually intended to be acted upon the stage, presenting a story by means of characters, speaking and acting in situations contrived to develop a plot, and with such accessories of scenery, stage machinery, costumes etc. as are fitted to produce an impression of reality.”⁹

As mentioned earlier, traditional Sinhala culture did not have a literary drama. This was largely due to the influence of Theravada Buddhism in which the Buddhist monks practice monastic life style. However, the inspiration of popular Buddhism gave rise to some forms of folk drama. When Christianity came to Sri Lanka with the advent of the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century, religious drama was brought by the missionaries from European countries. The tradition of Passion plays created by them gave rise to a variety of forms of drama in subsequent decades. Their influence is particularly evident in *nadagam*, a type of folk play, but *nadagam*, can also be found in all other forms of Sinhala drama.

In the history of literature and in the *jataka* stories, one finds plenty of dramatic material. In spite of these records, there is no evidence of drama in the early history of Sinhala literature. The traditional religious ideal of Theravada Buddhism regarded drama as incitements to passion.¹⁰ Sinhala literature generally evolved among Buddhist monks. And the lack of literary drama is attributed to the fact that for these literary men drama was prohibited. Some have also suggested that drama received no encouragement because singing, dancing and acting were relegated to the lower classes. As Sarachchandra explains:

“There is nothing to indicate that any spoken drama was acted either in the court or in the circles of the educated laity. The fact that writers did not produce anything in this genre, and did not even translate the Sanskrit plays that were known to them, would naturally have stood in the way of drama becoming a form of royal entertainment. Latter

contacts with South India brought about no change in the situation, doubtless because of the language difficulty that importation would cause, as well as because the South Indian drama was at a folk level and hardly a fit entertainment for the educated.”¹¹

Sinhala writers, however, knew of existence of drama. For example, Gurulugomi, the author of *Dharmapradipika*, quotes from Sri Harsha’s *Ratnâvali* to elucidate his story of *culla Kâlinge*. The author of the *Siyabaslakara* declares: “The life story of the Buddha shall be depicted in verse, and other descriptive writings in prose. In drama prose and verse should be intermingled.”¹² Though the *Siyabaslakaras* gives such instructions to narrate the life story of the Buddha in verse, the early poets in the periods of Polonnaruwa and dambadeniya have not followed them. They have taken the life stories of the Bodhisatva or the *jâtaka* stories in the *Muvadevâvatha*, *Sasadâvatha* and *Kausilumina* and not the life story of the Buddha. However, this idea does not appear in the original Sanskrit text of *Kâvyâdarsa*. In the field of traditional knowledge, drama was regarded as one of the sixty-four forms of arts (*sivu sâta kalâ*) that a prince should possess. For example, one of the rites connected with the sacred Tooth Relic of the Buddha at the city of Kurunagala in the year 1325 AD was dramatic: “these skilled with drama, dressed in colourful garments and bedecked with bright ornaments, should performed before the Relic”¹³ Moreover, the *Girâ sandêsaya* (1450-1460 AD) explicitly mentions that the pupils of Totagamu Pirivena school of Rahula Thero studied, besides Sanskrit, Pali, Sinhala and Tamil, the art of poetry and drama (*nahu*). Unfortunately, we have no evidence of the types of dramatic art practiced in the country in the past.

Different forms of plays performed in Sri Lanka

In addition to the literary sources found in the 14th and 15th centuries enough evidence is discovered from the archeological sources to unearth the evidence of existence of elements of drama such as dancing and singing in the ancient city of Anuradhapura and elsewhere. According to them there had been dancers, drummers, musicians and actors and actresses. At the same time we have plenty of information, however, about the folk plays prevalent in Sri Lanka. In the first place, there were realistic dances and plays performed by the people from ancient times to ward off disease and evil spirits, and to invoke the help of the gods in the various crises of life. Puppetry is mentioned as early as the twelfth century AD, and there is an elaborate description of how puppet shows were used for purposes of entertainment on festive occasions. During the time of King Parakramabahu II (1234 – 1269 AD)

in connection with the transfer of the sacred relics from Jambuddhoni to Sirivaddhana, says that the precincts of the monastery at Sirivaddhana were decorated with rows of figures of Brahma, that danced in lines holding white umbrellas and were beautiful because they were worked by a mechanism, with diverse-hued mechanical figures of gods.

Although puppet shows have a long history, the Sinhala puppet play, as it survives to day, is of recent origin. Puppetry as a dramatic art is said to have been stimulated by the folk play or folk opera, known as *nâdagam*. Another form of folk play was the masked play or *kôlam nâtîma*. This form presented an array of masked dancers, representing characters drawn from various sources but connected with a particular story. It ended with the enactment of that story in the form of a play, through the medium of song and spoken language, the latter being for the most impromptu. Different people did the singing while the dancers acted out the songs. The natural development of masked plays culminated in another variety of folk play called *kavi nâdagam*. In this form the masks were considered an unnecessary encumbrance, a hindrance to the development of dialogue, and were dropped entirely. Another type of folk play is *sokari*, which bears the stamp of being one of the earliest types. It is a form of dramatic entertainment confined to the hill country peasantry, with its several incidents strung together to yield a play of intense rustic appeal. Its humour, produced by the deliberate misunderstanding of words, gives rise to an unmistakable rustic character.

Development of plays and the religious traditions.

Mahayana Buddhism commonly absorbed many local cults and practices and made all kinds of concessions to the customs of people. However, Theravada was slow to make such concessions and preferred to keep the doctrines uncontaminated, even at the expense of its popularity. As a result of Theravada influence on Sinhala culture and literature, the country did not develop stage or literary drama.

Under the patronage of Buddhism, drama flourished in India, as it did in Burma and Siam (Thailand), two Theravada countries where well-developed drama could be found in the royal courts. This difference between the Indian and Sri Lankan contexts was largely due to royal patronage. In addition, however, traditional Sinhala culture regarded drama as morally unacceptable. Buddhist monks were discouraged from studying and promoting the dramatic arts, by an ascetic injunction. The culture also discouraged the literati, who might have developed poetic and dramatic compositions. After the *Kausilumina* of Parakramabahu II, no poetic works appeared for centuries. However, there is plenty of

evidence of dancing, drumming, feasting and public demonstrations at court and at religious functions. Despite the variety of types of folk play, however, there was no development of literary drama any time in the history of Sinhala literature.

A class of dramatic works in the Sinhala language, which hardly plays pretence to literary merit, has sprung up at a very recent date. These are written in imitation of Tamil and Urdu dramas. With the exception of drama, the old literature of Sinhala now in existence contains works of merit in all other branches of literary activity. The scholars of Sri Lanka in olden times were in communication with the chief centers of scholarship in India. Interchange of visits and of ideas and books are clearly seen. The more important Sinhala books bear a close relation to Sanskrit works in their style and method of arrangement. Such well-known Sanskrit dramatic works of merit as *Sakuntalā*, *Nāgānanda*, *Mudrarakshasa*, *Mrcchakatika*, some of them depicting Buddhist ideas, must have been familiar to the scholars of the island. Can it be possible that dramatic literature that existed in the island was lost when the Tamil invaders destroyed the libraries of the Sinhala, or when king Rajasinha collected and set fire to Sinhala works? But the books that have been secured or preserved from this general destruction are of a varied character; or were the dramatic works written by Sinhala authors of such an inferior order that they were soon forgotten or thrown away as worthless? It is impossible that scholars who were able to produce poetical and other works of merit were not able to produce anything of equal merit in drama.

The Christian Contribution to Sinhala Drama

As we are accustomed to a stereotyped channel of information relating to the nature of the influence exerted by Dravidian sources on the Sinhala drama, we are prone to gloss over the less known but more strong channel of influence. When we supplement conventional information with new knowledge gained through historical records of local and foreign writers, a different picture emerges. This view is in accordance with the type of theory we wish to position the effort of Christian missionaries of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, who visited Sri Lanka, which resulted in the emergence of the island's drama. In the performance of the Church's liturgy, the Christian worships and understands that beneath the dramatic aspect lies a rich source of grace. Events from sacred history are so vividly presented as to make them appear as happening today. The historical treatment is applied to the whole life of Christ, to the entire history of salvation, and to lives of saints. The historical plane serves as framework for the plane of grace.

During the first half of the 16th century, the Franciscan monks arrived in Sri Lanka; they were the first Christian missionaries. Later the Jesuit Fathers, the Dominicans and the Augustinians began missionary work in the island. They came from Portugal, where, at that time much enthusiasm prevailed for the staging of plays written on Christian themes. The Christian missionaries who came to Sri Lanka in the Portuguese period would have been familiar with religious drama in Portugal, Spain and other European countries.

Origin and development of dramatic performances.

Mostly Christian literature has dedicated itself to depict 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 and the Pentecost, the descending of the Holy Spirit, the centre of which is the outcome of aforementioned events. The season of Advent is a preparatory period of the Christmas, and the Lent for the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. These unique events in the life of Jesus have an effect on the lives of the faithful and create a culture. Undoubtedly, literature and art in the Western countries evolved from the Christian liturgy, customs and feasts. During the season of Lent which is a period of forty days from Ash Wednesday to Palm Sunday, the tradition of Passion play and singing of *pasan* are very common and popular.

This is really the background in which Christian drama grew up. The *modus operandi* of the Christian missionaries was the same wherever they set foot. First missionaries commence work with a little bit of liturgical music, then proceed on to processional displays involving the dramatization of certain events in the life of Jesus, some falling during Lent, and incidents associated with the crib and so on.

Christian liturgical drama in India and Sri Lanka

The content or the subject matter of Christian drama could be found in south Indian folk drama such as "*Therukkutthu*", a form of *Kuttu*. Those dramatic elements have come to Sri Lanka with the advent of the Christian missionaries. They have had the knowledge of the Christian liturgical drama while they were in India. Such liturgical dramas have also come to India from Portugal through the Christian missionaries. Portuguese liturgical plays have mingled with already existing folk dramas in India. Sinhala dramas and dramatic techniques also reveal such inter-mixture. Christian drama used by the Sri Lankan Tamil folk also experienced such influence. For instance, the *muvirāsakkal* Tamil drama has close links with the *Raja Tun Kattuwa* of

chilaw and also the Christian vocabulary of the missionaries have its influence on them. The *Muvirāsakkal* is still popular at Mannar and Thelippalei.

Christian liturgical dramas are mainly composed to commemorate the birth, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. They are Christmas plays and the Passion plays. The *Raja Tun Kattuwa* is a Christmas play. Its plot is of the three wise men from the East going together with three shepherds to worship babe Jesus born in a manger in Bethlehem. The autos Pastoral are the short dramas popular in Portugal having the same theme as three kings going to worship the newly born babe Jesus. The same type of plays were performed in India too. Scripts of the Portuguese plays are available together with the mode of performing them. The elements of dramatic performance of the Portuguese plays are found in Sri Lankan plays. In certain instances the same drama is staged with same techniques in both the Sinhala and Tamil speaking areas. Three kings going to worship the babe Jesus to Bethlehem is such an instance. This play is performed at Duwa, Negambo. At Baticaloa also it was shown in the same manner. There the kings come in a long procession. They are mounted on elephants. Three kings advanced from three different directions and met at a certain place, i.e. presently it is the Baticaloa Town Hall playground. Three kings went into the crib made there and made a detailed description about the difficult journey they had and offered their gifts to the babe Jesus. The angel and the shepherds too participated in the scene. The Duwa *Raja Tun Kattuwa* like wise was performed with the participation of a multitude of people. The liturgical plays which were originated in Portugal had come down to Sri Lanka via South India.

The Malabar musicians who visited Sri Lanka in the 16th 17th and 18th centuries have caused the emergence of the island's dramatic performances. The historian L.S.Devaraja gives an account of the intensive presence of the South Indians in Kandy:

“The series of royal marriages with South Indian families had created at Kandy towards the middle of the eighteenth century quite a colony of Nâyakkars relatives of the king. They were so numerous indeed that a special street was set apart for them in the capital. This was known as Kumaruppe Vidiya and after British occupation, Malabar Street. No Sinhalese was allowed to enter this street, not even the Buddhist monks. The strength of the south Indian connection was well displayed at the death of Kīrthi Sri Rājasinha.”¹⁴

South Indian music and drama have caused the development of Sri Lankan plays. It is particularly evident when examining the contribution of Fr. Jacome Gonsalves who came to Sri Lanka as a missionary of the

Oratorian Congregation on the 30th August 1705. What Christian missionaries promoted here in Sri Lanka was what was originated in Portugal and came to India and had taken root in the Indian soil. The plot of the plays and the dramatic techniques they have used have close relationship with Portuguese, Indian and that of Sri Lankan. It is interesting to note that Portuguese liturgical plays evolved to be full-fledged dramas.

Origin of Portuguese liturgical plays.

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* (Dramatic compositions) of the Portuguese dramatist and poet Gil Vicente (1470-1536) and his Spanish counterpart, the prolific playwright, Lope de Vaga (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 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 both in regard to length and the size of the cast.

The origin of the Portuguese plays could be found in their liturgy which professes the religious beliefs of people. It is true not only with the Portuguese history of drama but with any country which had Christian belief. The origin of religious drama of a country is not often portrayed in the advanced literature of that country but in the customs and behavior of ordinary people. In Portugal the dramatic elements could be found in the traditions of the Church festivals.

Among the variety of activities in a religious procession were mobile stage for the performance of drama. On them were staged various parts of life stories of Jesus. Particularly the processions of the Corpus Christy were full of such elements. They were full of various entertainments for the village folk. Such a procession contains numerous dramatic situations and characters. The stage is on a beautifully decorated cart and the cast enacted the stories from the Old Testament and the New Testament of the Bible. The plot of plays were not clearly defined in those dramatic performances. However, a certain incident is presented through the songs and dances of the actors. Such scenes had two groups of singers who stood on either side singing and making the dialogues heard. The lamentations or *Lathoni* on the theme of the passion of Jesus were also included in the Corpus Christy processions. The dramatic elements could be clearly seen in the lamentations sung by two groups of singers on the procession held on Good Friday. The poetic

dialogues of those singers created dramatic presentations. They represent the Portuguese religious plays popular among the village folk.

Religious songs used in processions.

In the 13th and 14th centuries in Portuguese villages the dramatic dialogues with songs were accompanied by mine. In singing they have always selected dialogues suitable for the theme of the play and acted while singing. The choristers have sung the wonderful life stories of saints accompanied with imitation and dialogues. They were also considered as the Portuguese folk songs. The singers modulated their voices to make an effective presentation of the plot of the story. All the roles of the play were acted by the singers themselves.

A procession has always been an expression of the togetherness of people. When a religious procession was taking place in Portugal, different groups of people have added different items to the procession. That was how all had opportunity of participating in it. Such acting and singing accompanied dramatic presentations of life stories of Jesus and a religious message was communicated to all those who have been watching the procession on the way.

Choristers have always selected the themes for Christian religious catechism. Later on the Church has used the same method for evangelization of peoples. Even today the Portuguese singer going on singing on streets in Portugal is a remnant of such old choristers. The themes of such a singer on the streets are of the war heroes and virtues of great women and so on. They were not of the religious themes because ordinary people expected of the singers to sing on exciting and interesting themes with wonders to break their monotonous and routine of lives they lived. It is quite natural that the village folk who lived far away from the royal court would be happy to hear wonderful stories of their kings and heroes. Certainly they enjoyed those narrations at the same time in the end of such stories they have learnt a lot of moral lessons that accompanied by the narrations.¹⁵ The moral lessons of the Ballad of *Count Alves* is that God is not pleased with a separation of happy married couple. On the other hand the pedagogy of the *Captive Count* is that God will not forgive those who are not faithful to their marriage covenant. All these ballads and plays have originated from the liturgical dramas.

A salient feature of liturgical plays was that there were pilgrimages. Vigil divine services were conducted in the night which were followed by religious festivals. People have also flocked together in the bring and buy sales and fairs, and all these features have created a certain culture. Religious songs were sung on open-air stages. All these

suggested dramatic elements though they have not developed to be full-fledged drama.

Nativity plays

The *Autos* (Dramatic performance) composed by Gil Vicente were popular, and 17 of these were religious dramas, called *Obras de Devocao*. Gil Vicente died about 1537, and his writings were published at Lisbon in 1561-1562. It is interesting to note that one of his *autos* was about the Three Kings (*Reis Magos*). The Jesuit Fathers had already become famous for the religious dramas which they wrote and staged in their schools and parishes. When they came to Asia, they adhered to the same practice of instructing and inspiring their converts through religious plays. Among them the nativity plays were very popular and also were effective in bringing about the religious message of Jesus. The celebrations of the Christmas week was full of dramas having subject matter of birth of the Jesus, lives of saint Stephan and saint John and Holy Innocents. The nativity plays project the significance of religiosity of the Portuguese.

The birth of Jesus is portrayed in the festival named *Novena* in Portugal. During this festival season in almost every house and a church people have dramatic presentation of a crib, song of the shepherds, roles played by the angel Gabriel and the Three Kings from the East. These dramatic situations and characters were often presented with acting and singing. The 14th century nativity plays have projected the primary elements of drama. The dialogues among the shepherds who went to worship the newly born Jesus at Bethlehem had the dramatic visual effect. Such elements gave rise to the advanced forms of nativity plays. They became very popular in Portugal and added much glamour to the liturgical celebrations. They also had the entertainment value for all categories of people. With that purpose more and more dances were also included in them and such dances were called as “Christmas Dance”, “Dance of the babe Jesus.” All these dramatic and entertainment factors have evolved to form full-fledged Nativity Plays.

Passion Plays

The Passion plays staged on the theme of passion, death and resurrection of Jesus have taken a prominent place among the dramas in Portugal. They were called *Autos da Paixao* and some of them available in printed scripts that belong to the 17th century. However, there had been Passion plays staged even in the 13th century. In Western Europe too similar Passion plays have been staged. They were well organized and

developed as full-fledged dramas in the 15th century. That was after the establishment of the Christian brotherhoods called “Confrerries”. The three Marias, in the Portuguese plays, i.e. Maria Salome, Maria Cleophas and Maria Magdalena, present at the tomb of Jesus were present in all the European Passion plays.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is considered as a great miracle and therefore, this incident was dramatized to create a sense of reverence to Jesus. The events connected with the lives of three Marias such as; their going to the tomb, meeting the guard, the disappearance of the body of Jesus from the tomb, an angel coming to tell them that the body of Jesus is no more there because he has risen from the dead, and spreading that message among the villagers by singing *Alleluia* were presented with dialogues and singing by the actors. The most ancient religious dramas in Europe had a close link with the Paschal celebrations. One of the ancient customs was to bury the cross on Good Friday and unearth it on the Easter Sunday. The religious dramatists have created a beautiful scene of this festival event. It is commonly accepted fact that in the Middle Age religious dramas the Christian clergy have sung taking their turns in Passion songs in the morning of the Easter Sunday.

However, the Portuguese dramatists have elaborated the Paschal events in producing dramas. They have taken an isolated incidents of the Paschal event to compose a drama of its own. A drama script on the three Marias was composed in 1497. Such long plays were staged day and night. All these good old traditions of the Passion plays have come down in the later centuries to mould the modern Passion plays. They have been formed and developed in the cradle of Portugal through centuries in its religious, cultural and linguistic background. Therefore, the advent of drama from Portugal to India, and from India to Sri Lanka is the historical process we notice.

Autos plays which originated in Portugal and Spain came to Goa in India with the advent of the Franciscan and Jesuit missionaries. They have taken different forms in India. Particularly they were staged at St. Paul's Jesuit College in Goa. Two prominent Oratorian missionaries who came to Sri Lanka, Fr. Joseph Vaz and Fr. Jacome Gonsalves were students of this College and were well versed in this dramatic tradition. They have staged Passion plays in Vanni and Kandy for the first time during the Holy Week, in the year 1707 even all stage equipment was provided by their Oratorian Congregation. During the Dutch period the Passion plays were staged with statues and read from the *Dukprapthi Prasangaya* of Fr. Jacome Gonsalves. This work itself is with the structure and form of a Passion play dividing its materials into seven days. In between the scenes the *Desana Navaye Pasan Pota* was read.

The *Dukprapthi Prasangaya* provided enough material to be read during the Passion plays performed with the help of statues. After receiving independence during the British period the persecuted Catholics have received religious freedom, which enabled them to organize Passion plays. They were well organized in certain places and created a lasting long tradition of the plays.

The Passion play tradition of Duwa is one of the very old traditions. The original script of it was based on the *Dukprapthi Prasangaya* of Fr. Jacome Gonsalves and statues were used for characters. A special feature of the story of this Passion play is marked with the statues of Jesus brought from Cochin in India on 27th March 1838. It was carved by, Joachim Mesthri of Cochin and has been used in the Passion play from 1839. Another salient feature was added in 1939 to the Duwa Passion play when Fr. Marceline Jayakody composed a script and the hymns for the play when he was the Parish priest. Then except for the statues for Jesus, all the other statues were replaced by live actors. The Pamunugama Passion play was organized by the dramatist Aloy Kotikawatta who was a relation and a disciple of Kurange Lawrence Perera of Boralessa. A permanent stage was constructed in front of the church. Passion play was staged by using statues. The play consists of the story of Adam and Eve up to the ascension of Jesus. In the 1950s live actors replaced the statues. It is recorded that the light, sound effect and costumes were much appreciated by the audience.

Kurange Lawrence Perera's Passion play at Boralessa marks a different direction in the tradition of Passion plays in Sri Lanka. His visit to the Passion play village of Oberammergau had given him all the necessary inspiration and materials to organize the one at Boralessa. He was able to create a Passion play village at Boralessa similar to that of Oberammergau. My study tours to both places inspired me to do a comparative and analytic study of both the plays. Oberammergau lies deeply embedded in the Bavarian Alps and some sixty-four miles to the south and west Munich in Germany. The Passion play in this village was started in 1634. In 1632 a plague struck southern Germany spreading over the European continent. All those who were infected with the Plague called the “Black Death” died. Though thousands of people from Germany and Europe became the victims to this deadly plague, the exact number of victims were not known because the official death registrars, also died of the plague. All unanimously agreed that the cause of the Black Death was due to the curse of God for the religious wars that were ravaging Europe, and all the terrible happenings that went with them. In 1633 the survivors of the epidemic in Oberammergau gathered in the parish church. Led in prayer by the parish priest a solemn vow was made

to God that they would enact every tenth year, a Passion play recalling the Last Supper, the Lord's arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, his final condemnation by Pilate, his journey with the Cross to Calvary, his crucifixion and in return for his intercession and the passing of the Black Death from their midst. Ever since not another soul died in Oberammergau of the plague. Thereafter, the men, women and children of Oberammergau perform a drama of a different kind: the Passion of Jesus.

One of the longest Passion play traditions in Sri Lanka was established by K. Lawrence Perera of Boralessa. It had so much to do with the original play at Oberammergau that the 14th anniversary of the play in 1937 it was advertised as "Local Oberammergau (Boralessa)". K. Lawrence Perera was talented with singing, music and had liking for drama and art. As a young man he was sent to London by his father to study law. However, he had no aptitude for the study of law. Since his area of interest was drama he went to Oberammergau to see the Passion play. He stayed there for two years and studied every aspect of the play such as the script, techniques, stage settings and costumes. When he returned to Sri Lanka he organized the Passion play at Boralessa, initially staged on 1st April 1923. In this Passion play live actors acted instead of statues. Spectators from all over the island and even from South India had gathered to witness the play staged in 1936. It was interesting for me to make a literary analysis and a comparative study of the two scripts of Oberammergau and that of Boralessa to see the similarities of the two.

The three statues at Pallansena were carved by an artist from India in 1847. They were the statue of Jesus tied on to the pillar, death of Jesus and of the risen Christ. For the first time the Passion play was staged using such statues in that same year. Dressed statues were used as puppets for the characters of Mary, the mother of Jesus, John his beloved disciple and Mary Magdalene. The Passion play tradition of Kelaeliya was originated with the artist Michael Master, who was a disciple of K. Lawrence Perera of Boralessa. In 1940 the play was carried out with puppet style statues manipulated with strings. Those statues of Jesus and Mary were replaced by statues of clay and for the rest of the characters live actors were taken. In 1963 the play consisted of the Biblical story from the creation of Adam and Eve to life of Jesus. The Kalaeliya Passion play used live actors for all characters in 1972. It was titled, "the Tragedy of Golgotha" in 1986 and staged at the John de Silva theatre. The Kalamulla Passion Play used life sized wooden statues. The bier on which the body of Jesus is placed is inscribed with the date 4th April 1844. A special feature here is that the statues of the two thieves

crucified beside Jesus are also preserved there. An artist from Goa, Philip Alvaris had carved the two statues of Jesus tied on to a pillar and the Risen Christ.

In the subsequent decades the Passion play tradition has largely evolved in number of places and the dramatic techniques used in the plays. During the season of Lent this popular para-liturgical plays are widely performed in many churches for the purpose of religious instructions and worship.

End Notes

1. Sarachchandra, E.R. *The folk drama of Ceylon*, department of cultural affairs, government press, Colombo, 1966, p.111.
2. Flannery, A. Vatican Council II, Costello Publishing Company, Bombay, 1975, pp.24,25.
3. The Greek word *mimesis* means, mime.
4. Speaight, R. *the Christian theatre*, Burns & Oates, 1960, p.9.
5. Peiris, E. *Sinhalese Catholic Drama*, The Messenger, 22.12.1966, p.2.
6. Thakurta, G *the Bangali Drama*, Dhaka, 1968, pp. 1-3.
7. Ibid.
8. Sarachchandra, E.R. *The Sinhalese Folk Drama of Ceylon*, p.111.
9. *The New American Encyclopedia*, New York, 1968, p.34.
10. Kāvya nāṭakadi garhita vidya tama nūgatayuthu, anunuth nūganviyayuthu." *Dambadeni Kathikavata*.
11. Sarachchandra, E.R. *The Sinhalese Folk Play and the Modern stage*, Colombo, 1953, p.23.
12. "pedeñ budu siritha – basin vath sirith ä, padayuthu basin nalu ä – anathuru lakumu dakvam."
13. *The Dalada Siritha*.
14. Devaraja, L.S. *The Kingdom of Kandy*, 1707-1760, Colombo, p.41.
15. Goonathileka, M.H. *The Christian contribution to Early Sinhala Theatre*, p. 91.