

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY ON SRI LANKAN ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH FEAST CEREMONY

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Abstract

Sri Lanka is rich with various cultural projections, come from different cultural identities created under a multi-religious environment. Roman Catholicism is the second main religion in Sri Lanka and its historicity goes back to Sri Lanka's Portuguese colonial period, according to certified Archaeological evidence. This research work is aimed to study the ethnographic background of this proposed tradition of “Roman Catholic church feast ceremony” and give solutions to the lack of knowledge and attention driven to this area, by the current Sri Lankan Roman Catholic society. Questions in the identification of the difference between previous and current cultural features that conventionally separated from each churches, and evidence that can be substantially and commonly acceptable to certify this proposed event's historical timeline goes back to the Portuguese time, were addressed by this research. This research work was done in a qualitative methodology with primary and secondary resources such as, books, newspaper articles, e-resources and information collected by exploring in the field, including, some of the ancient Roman Catholic churches in Sri Lanka. Results of this research work can be divided into two parts as “revealing the historical environment” and “explaining the cultural characteristics”. History of this tradition goes back to the prior British colonial period. Introduce of "Church feast flag hoisting ceremony by St. Joseph Vaz", and a historical “church feast ceremony” held at Kandy in the Portuguese colonial time can be considered as examples for the historicity mentioned earlier in the abstract. And, events like, “Karaththa Mangalyaya” in the feast of St. Anne's Church - Kattimahana, “Oru Mangalyaya” in the feast of St. Anne's Church - Thalawila and some different “after feastday or pre-feast day Suruwam Perahera traditions” in separated churches can be included in the proposed “cultural characteristics explanation”.

Keywords: Ethnographic, feast, historical, Catholic

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Literature Review

Introduction to the Concept of " Church Feast "

Literally, a " Church Feast Ceremony " is interpreted itself as any kind of ceremonial event that is organized in centering a " religious and a cultural purpose " which is connected with the major religious, cultural, philosophical and heritage-based roots of Christianity. From the Roman Catholic Perspective, a " Roman Catholic Church Feast Ceremony (Celebration) " is held to commemorate an event of the Life of the Jesus Christ or the Mother Mary (Earthly Mother of the Jesus Christ) and commemorate the Life of a saint for the purpose of " taking examples to our lives " from those divine events and divine lives. Since, every and each Roman Catholic Churches located across Sri Lanka are separately dedicated for Jesus/Holy Spirit/Mother Mary or various saints, generally, the villagers and the other devotees (if that particular place is a well-known shrine in Sri Lanka) are used to commemorate the Death Anniversary of that particular saint or celebrate that special event that had taken part in the lives of Jesus and Mother Mary, or, celebrate the Jesus or Mother Mary with their special titles.

But technically, the Word of " Feasts " aren't existed lonely, but, holding two types of other celebrations herewith as - " Solemnities " and " Memorials ". The ironic thing in here is, eventhough people are used to use the word " Feasts " for every kind of " Religious Ceremonial Events that are organized by the Roman Catholic Church ", it's not appropriate for all of them, since, most of those popular " Feast Celebrations " are actually, " Memorials ! ". From this paper, these confuses are expected to unknot.

Difference between " Feasts ", " Memorials " and " Solemnities "

Generally, Feasts are celebrated to commemorate the divinity and the divine lives of Apostles and commemorate some special titles holding Mary and Jesus and some of the special events in their holy " earthly lives ". Some examples for these types of " Feasts " are mentioned below :

Eg :

1. Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross

This is a special feast day, since Catholic devotees commemorate a historical event remarked on the Way of the History of Catholicism. Catholics believe that, on this special and divine day, St. Helena of Constantinople (Mother of the Emperor of the Constantine - the Great) and her team found some of the remains of the Exact Holy Cross which was used for the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ. This feast is commemorated with a Catholic historical event ; apart from the main purposes of celebrating a feast day - " remembering a special life event of the Jesus Christ "/ " commemorating the divine life of an apostle " or any of the other reason, mentioned at the beginning of this paper.

- ◆ Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord Jesus Christ
- ◆ Feast of St. Thomas-the Apostle

Etc.

Apart from " Feasts Celebrations ", " Memorials " are still being celebrated to commemorate divine lives of the other Saints (except Saint Peter, Saint Paul and Saint John De Baptist, because of belonging all of the celebrations regarding St. Peter and St. Paul and the " Nativity " of St. John the Baptist for the Category of " Solemnities ", not for both of " Memorials " or " Feasts " .). Most of the Church Celebrations popularly established as " Feasts " in this society belong for this " Memorial " category. These are some examples for this :

- Memorial of St. Anthony of Padua
- Memorial of St. Anne's. and St. Joachim's
- Memorial of St. Sebastian of Narbone, Rome

Etc.

Solemnities are considered as included it in the Category of " High-Ranked Catholic Ceremonies ", since, the Purpose of celebrating Solemnities is " Commemorating the Major Catholic Mysteries : lives of the Jesus and Mother Mary with some of the Major Events of their Holy Lives ". Additionally, the Celebration of the Death

Anniversary of St. Peter - the Apostle and St. Paul - the Apostle is identified as a " Solemnity ", by the Roman Catholic Church. Here are some examples for this category of " Solemnities " :

- Solemnity of the Nativity of Lord Jesus Christ (namely, the " Christmas " .)
- Solemnity of St. Joshep - the Spouse of Saint Mary - the Mother of God
- Solemnity of the Birth of St. John the Baptist
- Solemnity of St. Peter's and Paul's
- Solemnity of the Assumption of Mother Mary (the Day which is belived as Mother Mary entered to Heaven, sfter her earthly life.)
- Solemnity of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ (namely, the " Easter Day ")
- Solemnity of the " Corpus Christi " (" Corpus Christi " = " the Body and Blood of the Christ ")

The Components in the “ Church Feast Ceremony ”

Generally, a “ Church Feast Ceremonial Season ” (including Solemnities that are held as feasts, Feasts and Memorials) is started from the Event of “ Flagstaff Hoisting ”. This is held around 10 or 11 days before (sometimes, just a week before) to the Main ceremonial day. Then the “ Novenna Masses ” will be held withing the rest days (around 8 or 9 or sometimes ... 6 or 5 days). On the previous day to the Main Ceremonial Day, the “ Vesper Mass (“ Ghaambheera Sandya Meheya ”) ” will be held from the Evening to - near mid night. Then, from the First Sun-rays to the Dawn of the Very Next Day - “ The Feast Day ” the Main “ Feast Mass / Masses ”, including the “ Festive High Mass ” (“ Mangala maha Diwya Yaagaya ”) are held at the Particular Church Premises. Before starting all of these “ Novenna, Vespers and Festive - High ” masses, generally the Litany of the particular saint or the holy figure that the “ church is dedicated to ” will be enunciated. The Litany contains the Life Events of that holy figure or some special life qualities, or the abilities that particular saint or that holy figure has or some social services that particular one has done for the human’s society. At the End of the Masses, a hymn of that particular holy figure will be sung with the Liturgical Music Compositions.

Research Methodology

Since all of these are Social Scientific disciplinaries, the Qualitative Methodology was applied in here. In centering this " Qualitative Methodology ", there are several methods used to collect information.

Both of the " Prepared Interviews " and " Free-Structured Interviews " were conducted with church and parish in-charge priests of the Selected Churches and Shrines and some of the Adults who were identified as the Oldest villagers and devotees by those proposed churches and shrines. Apart from these interviews, the Secondary resources gathered by referring the Collections like, National Archives Collections and Catholic Archives (Protected) Collections were used in here. Additionally some of the books, journals, thesises, magazine and newspaper articles which are stored respectively in the National Library of Sri Lanka and the Main Library of the University of Kelaniya. The selected churches and shrines are listed down below with the details related for their locations (see the References list - which is mentioned at the End of this paper to check the secondary resources used to do this research work) :

- St. Sebestian's Church - Kandana, Gampaha, Sri Lanka
- St. Anne's Church - Wattala, Sri Lanka
- St. Anne's Church - Weligampitiya, Ja-Ela, Sri Lanka
- Sacred Heart of the Jesus's Church - Maththumagala, Gampaha, Sri Lanka
- Our Lady of Lourdes' Church - Thewaththa, Ragama, Sri Lanka
- St. Anthony's Church - Wahakotte, Matale, Sri Lanka
- St. Anne's Church - Thalawila, Kalpitiya, Sri Lanka
- Our Immaculate Mother of Mathara's Church - Mathara, Sri Lanka
- Our Lady of Good Voyage's (" Sindathri Church) Church - Negombo, Gampaha, Sri Lanka
- Holy Cross Church - Gampaha Town, Sri Lanka
- St. Jude's Shrine - Indigolla, Gampaha, Sri Lanka
- St. Sebestian's Shrine - Moragoda, Gampaha, Sri Lanka
- St. Sebestian's Church - Moratuwa, Colombo, Sri Lanka
- Our Lady of Snows' Church - Negombo, Sri Lanka

- St. Philip Neri's Church - Fort, Colombo, Sri Lanka
 - Holy Mother of Expectations' Church - Eldeniya, Kadawatha, Gampaha, Sri Lanka
- Etc.

Research Objective(s)

Sri Lanka is renowned as a country, rich with multi-cultural projections come-out from the Ethnic, Religious, Cultural, Racial and Language and Literature based Diversity in this area which have 65610 square kilometers. Buddhism and combined " Sri Lankan Cultural Heritage is popularized as the Hidden reason for this inter-religious, inter-cultural, inter-ethnic harmony. In this kind of environment, this research work is aimed to search about the place which is received for the " Sri Lankan Catholic Culture and combined Sri Lankan Catholicism " among the other religious and cultural norms and their projections existed in Sri Lankan " Multi-Religious " cultural context. Since, this research work is specifically focused for a partition from that major culture : " The Sri Lankan Roman Catholic Feast Ceremony Tradition ", several Roman Catholic churches and shrine which are located across the Country and their feast, memorial and solemnity ceremonies were selected for doing this research work and the History and the gradual evolution of the Features related with those Cultural and Traditional Components of those events were described in here according to the results of this proposed research work. The main purpose of doing this kind of research work is the Awaiting about a main cultural, traditional and religious ingredient in the " Sri Lankan Catholic Cultural Context " among the outer society which is created with the People who follow other religions and practice their cultural components.

Research Problems

These are the Main Research Problems that are highlighted in the Context of this research work :

- Do the History of this collective of events go for the Portuguese Colonial Era or is it limited for the British Ruling Period in Sri Lanka ?
- If the first sentence is correct in here, what are the Church Feast/Memorial or Solemnity Ceremonies that have been identified as belonging them for the Portuguese Colonial Period in Sri Lanka ?
- Do those historical timelines go parrellaly for the Historical Timeline of the Related Church or the Shrine, too ?
- How do the traditions and cultural components of those events transmit from generation to generation with significantly remarking their evolution ?

Research Gap

This research work was completely done because of the Lack of doing researches, analysis, surveys etc. regarding this proposed area that was identified in the field. This lack is remarked in there, because, most of the amateur researchers and general researchers haven't this intention and interest of conducting research works regarding this proposed area and most of their researches are limited themselves for understanding and searching about " Sri Lankan Catholicism ", from its religious and philosophical perspective. Not from the Cultural or Traditional, Societal Perspective.

As an attempt in fulfilling this lack and blank, this entire research work was done.

Explanation on the Results of the Research Work

A brief description on the History of the " Roman Catholic Church Feast Ceremony Tradition ", spanned across Sri Lanka

According to the Historical Records, the History of these events : Feasts, Memorials and Solemnities (celebrated within the Sri Lankan Context) goes for the Portuguese Colonial Period. Approximately 500 years to 600 years ago, there were some historical evidences combined with ancient chronicals which displayed with some renowned church feast ceremonies such as : " The Annual Memorial Feast Ceremony of St. Anne's Shrine - Thalawila " and " The Annual Marian Feast Ceremony of the Our Lady of Mathara, held at the Shrine of Our Lady of Mathara at Mathara, Sri Lanka " etc. as established as those ceremonies are being held continuously from that Portuguese Colonial period (ex :- the History of the Thalawila [held in the Month of July] celebration goes for at least 600 years ago etc.). The Other records, which were recorded during the Kandyan Era reflected that this historical timelines goes for the Dutch Colonial Period in Sri Lanka which is the time that St. Joshep Vaz lived here. With

the Cardinality of St. Joshep Vaz, several historical church feast ceremony events were held in respecting respectively for St. Anthony of Padua (This was held in that contemporary Kandy and Historians and Archaeologists believe that the major shrine that was used to conduct the main mass was the " Present-Day : St. Anthony's Church - Kandy " and it was held on 13th of June.) and Mother Mary (This is belived that it was held on a Feast Date of the Assumption of Mother Mary : 16th of August). During the " Catholics Suppressing Time " existed in the Dutch Colonial Period in Sri Lankan History, the wonder that was shown by St. Joshep Vaz with spreading the Gospel and teaching the God's Pathway for the People who followed other pathways apart from the Catholicism, should have to be appreciated with the Warm Thanks Giving of Sri Lankan Present Day Catholics for that extraordinary character. The Flag Tree that is hoisted today to sign the Begining of the Feast Season of a particular church or shrine was believed that it was introduced to that and today's Carholic Society, by St. Joshep Vaz himself in taking influence from the Flag Trees that were hoisted to remark the Beginings of the Feast Seasons of Devala located in South Indian Reigons. When those can be easily certified with looking at that South Indian Devala Traditions.

The Feast Ceremony of Wahakotte St. Atnthony's National Shrine is belived that, a deep historical roots system is existed with this event since the Begining of this shrine combined with St. Joshep Vaz, since he used this place (at that time there was no any shrine or church there, but had a small " hidden pilgrimage place "- built by the Rest of the Catholics who lived around this area) as a hidden dhamma school which was used to teach the Chrstianity and the Gospels for those contemporary Catholics who were used to hiding themselves from Dutch officers and soilders. And, St. Joshep Vaz used this land to build a shrine, secretly from Dutch Ruling. Nowadays people belive that the present St. Anthony's Shrine is that one which was built according to the advices given by St. Joshep Vaz. The Ancient St. Anthony's Statue which can be seen inside there and the Ancient Statue of St. Mary's which is stored in a glass covorage in St. Anne's Church - Weligampitiya, Ja Ela are belived that they belong for a same time scale : time period and offered for both of those churches and shrines by St. Joshep Vaz. Eventhough in today, these statues are being uncovered for the Public Veneration - on the Days of the Feast Days.

Explanation on the Historical Evolution of some of the selected Components in the Cultural Projection of this event (using some of the selected church feast ceremonies in Sri Lanka - as examples)

Cultural projection and Traditions in this collection of the events of " Sri Lankan Roman Catholic Church Feast, Memorial and Solmenity Ceremonies " were being evolved throughout some centuries. The contemporary time period we have taken here for the Context of this research work which is started from the Portuguese Colonial Period to the Modern Age holds all of those fluctuations and significant remarks regarding the Evolution come from those centuries. In this research work and it's process, brings some points in certifying this. This following list should have to be checked :

The Tradition of using fire crackers and fire works called in Sinhala as " Gal Wedi " that was created by entering some amount of fire work powder into a coconut shell that have a small sized cravity and light them by watching how do the height of that fire work (Sinhala :- " Mal Wedi Warusawa ") increase itself ... can be seen even in today too during the Season of the Feast of the " Our Lady of Muthurajawela " held at Nilsirigama, Muthurajawela, Sri Lanka. The History of this tradition goes for the Mid 19th Century, according to the literary evidences like the book of " Mage Gama Gewath Muthurajawela (ISBN 955-950-86-0-1) " , written by Mr. Sisil Rodarigo. The Aesthety of the Culture of creating and erecting small sized " Flag Trees " by children - in most of the Gardens of the Surrounded Houses from the Church Area ... during the Church Feast Ceremony Season in this village, Muthurajawela comes from the Historical Roots of that Church.

From where did the tradition of throwing Jasmine flower garlands and Jasmine flowers to the Statue of St. Anthony during the Procession of the Feast of the Shrine of St. Anthony's located in Colombo 13 has influenced ? There is an ancient kovil closely located to the Church and when the Sellers who built Jasmine Flower Garland Shops near that particular Kovil, expand their businesses to the Catholics who came to that particular church area. Then, it is not so difficult to understand the Cultural and Traditional Diffusion happened between these factors (

because the Christianity doesn't allow us to offer these kinds of flowers, foods, or any other related thing to statues.
)

The Historical event of " Oru Mangalyaya " held during the Main Feast Celebration of the National Shrine of St. Anne's that is held in the Month of March. This event is celebrated to commemorate the Martyrs who offered their lives by uncovring for some gun shots released by Dutch Soilders while they were going to the Churches using boats " !

The Tradition of erecting a " Thorana (there are some critics on using the English word of " Pandol " for these types of " Thoran ") " by adding some of the Painted images regarding the Nativity of the Jesus Christ and some other life stories of Jesus Christ (except the " Crucifixion " and the " Resurrection " of the Jesus Christ) and display it on the Christmas day's night by some of the rural Catholic churches which are located near the Coastal Area. Not just this, but, when it comes to the History of the Villages like " Waththala ", " Weligampitiya ", " Kandana ", " Ja-Ela ", " Mabola ", " Maththumagala " etc most of those historical evidences are good sources to understand about the Concepts like, " In-Culturation ", " Cultural Diffusion " and " Cultural Imitation " etc. The Ancient Tradition of making " Christmas Lanterns ", after taking the Influence from " Vesak Lanterns " was mentioned in those types of secondary and web resources. But that tradition was being gradually vanished tthroughout the Time from that past. This tradition was widespreadly used in the areas like, " Kandana ". Since the Jesus Christ have not any previous lives or after-death lives as Lord Buddha, those people used to call that " Roman Catholic Thorana " system as a " Visual Storytelling Collection ". The Buddhist religious-philosophical meaning combined with these " Amisa Pooja " - charity works were seperared from this Catholic Context. But, the Rest is portraying the Same Situation. (" Christmas " is considered as a " Solemnity ") (Specially the Historical Evidences, Secondary and Web Resources regarding the Shrines like : St. Sebastian's Church, Kandana, St. Anne's Shrine - Waththala and Weligampitiya [Both] and some other closest churches which are dedicated to Jesus Christgiving plenty of information and details regarding this work.)

There is another beautiful tradition of Playing " Rubbun " while the Devotees are walking behind the Feast Day Procession of St. Cecilia's Shrine - Raddolugama, Seeduwa and the Point to be wondered in here is, those " Uban Players " are using Sinhala Rubban Tones and Poems

Apart from all above cognizences, the following list is consisted with some heritabilities that were dentified during the Research's Exploration :

1. People used to use their fishing equipments, such as - " Fishing Nets ", " Creets " etc, to create " Feast Gateways " and other kinds of " Feast Decorations " at the " Mother of Purification's Church - Pitipana, Sri Lanka ", since the Majority of People around the Church are fishers. Also, The Procession of the Annual Feast of this church is considered as the Most Longest Church Feast Procession in Sri Lanka. According to it's history, the Villagers of the Past made the Area to the Way for the Procession for faring between their gardens by removing the Gates, Fences and sometimes the Bridges also. Those women have worn " Redi Hetta " and " Kamba (" Muthuwan Kamba ", " Kalawam Kamba ") " and male devotees have worn " Sarong ", Mes Baniyan " and " Black Coat " when they attend for the Feast Mass of this church.
2. In 1929, after the Constructions of the New " St. Hugo's Church - Burullapitiya, Negombo ", It was arised the Neccesity of taking back (to the Newly Constructed Church) the Holy Statue of " St. Hugo " which was reposed temporarily at the " Our lady of Purification's Church - Bolawalana, Negombo " (Present Day) which was used as the Old " St. Hugo's Church " during that contemporary time. When the People brought that statue out from the Bolawalana Church, it was suddnely and heavily rain and, an unpremiditated situation of flood was occurred because of that rain. Then, those devotees had decided to keep that staute at the Bolawalana Church until the Sunrise of the Following Day of feast. By remarking this historical event, there is a present - day tradition of bringing the Statue of St. Hugo to the Our lady of Purification's Church - Bolawalana on the Vespers Day (" Sandya Meheya Dinaya " - the previous day for the Feast Day), conduct the " Vespers Mass ", at there and bring the Proposed Statue with a colourful procession to the St. Hugo's Church - Burullapitiya in the Morning of the Feast Day (Before or Between the St. Hugo's Church Annual Feast mass).

3. There is another tradition of Commemorating St. Joshep Vaz during the “ Christmas - Mid Night Mass ” at the “ Infant Jesus’s Shrine - Kalamulla ”, according to a historical encounter of constructing a shrine (over the Saction of St. Joshep vaz) called “ Naththal Maduwa ” which was used as a “ hidden place for doing Catholic Masses with those past Catholic devotees ”, during the Dutch Colonial Period in Sri Lanka. Historians found that, this present - day “ Kalamulla Infant Jesus’s Church ” is developed version, developed stage of that ancient “ Naththal Maduwa ”.
4. During the Feast Season of St. Sebestian, which is started from the Midth of First and Second Weeks of January, there is a tradition of Erecting the Statues of St. Sebestian, closely to the coastal area spanned from Kaluthara to Batticaloa and Giving Alms of Rice Packets which are consisted with the Curries of “ Jak ”, “ Pumpking ”, “ Fish ” with “ Pickel ”. And, those Catholics who lives within these areas used to give “ Milk Rice ”, “ Curd ” additionally. This sweetiest tradition can be seen in the Area, where the “ St. Sebestian’s Shrine - Wellaweediya, Negombo ” is located today.
5. The Feast of “ Bhaara Mangalyaya ” (held around the Area of “ Hendala ”) which is held as a “ Thanksgiving ” for St. Sebestian which is being remarked a historical encounter of “ Curing of the People from an epidemic (Historians believe that it was “ Leprosy ”) after surrendering to the Statue of St. Sebestian in the Enderamulla’s Church (Some of the Historians say that, it wasn’t the Enderamulla’s Church, but the Kandana’s Church), during the English Colonial Period. Apart from this, there is another tradition of “ Abiding the Statues of ‘ Our Lady of Rosa Mystica ’ and ‘ The King of the Jesus ’ to the devotees’ houses and doing some religious observances ”, withing the Areas of “ Hendala ”, “ Waththala ”, “ Enderamulla ”, “ Weligampitiya ”, “ Ja Ela ”, “ Nayakakanda ” etc.
6. Within the Areas, such as “ Duuwa ” in Negombo, there is a tradition of “ Firing Fire Crackers ” by remarking the Beginning of the Month of December - “ The Christmas Month ”. Most of the churches there organize nine days - “ Novenna Masses ” from 11 days priorly from the Christmas as celebrating it as a general “ Church Feast Ceremony ”. Those churches organize a vesper mass before the Christmas Mid Night Mass held on 24th of December, annually if the Christmas day falls on a Sunday. If it is not, the “ Christmas Feast Ceremony and Mass ” will be held on the Very First Sunday after the “ Christmas ” and the General Christmas Mass is held on 25th of December, as the Liturgical Calender. But, the Difference between a general church feast celebration and this one is, this “ Duuwa Christmas Feast Season ” is started by “ Giving Alms ” !!! These has a history spanned through more than, 180 years and there ara some historical evidences that the Dutches also did a “ Firing Artilleries ” in 1576 by remarking the Beginning of December. It’s not only in “ Duuwa ”, but, the “ St. Sebestian’s Church - Katuwapitiya, Negombo ” is also holding a significant cultural identity contains :
 - I. The Tradition of Hoisting “ Flagstaffs ” in every road junctions located around the Church’s Area (Apart from the Main Flagstaff that is arised infront of the Church) ,
 - II. The Tradition of Erecting more than 50 gateways apart from the Main Church Entrance’s Gateway, around the Katuwapitiya and surrounded villages.
 - III. The Tradition of Giving Alms, specially for the Boys, during the Feast Season of St. Sebestian - since the Believe of St. Sebestian as the Patron Saint for “ Boys ”.

Conclusion

Sri Lanka is a " Multi-Cultural ", " Multi-Religious ", " Multi-Ethnic ", " Multi-Traditional " etc. country ; From it's ancient and deep historical roots which were nourished from the Arriving of Buddhism to the Country from Mahinda Maharath Thero (most of the people knows as " Mahindagamanaya) are being displayed through generation to generation with projecting the Idea on the " Religious and Ethnic Harmony. " In these contexts, within these values and norms, understandings ... this entire research work has been done in centering the Limitations of the Topic :- " An Ethnographic Study on the Roman Catholic Church Feast Ceremony, in Sri Lanka. "