

Edifices in Dark Days: Origin, Types and Development of Oratorian Missionary Churches in Sri Lanka

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I. INTRODUCTION

Up to the beginning of the sixteenth century the main forms of religious architecture in Sri Lanka were mostly the Buddhist and Hindu temples. With the arrival of the Portuguese, a new form of religious architecture made its appearance—the Catholic church. This new architecture, which the missionary zeal of the Portuguese brought to Sri Lanka, was much in contrast to the prevailing architecture of the country. The evangelization of Sri Lanka was begun by Franciscan missionaries who arrived in 1543. They were followed later by Jesuits in 1602, Dominicans in 1605 and Augustinians in 1606. Thus, the mission field of Sri Lanka was shared among the four major European missionary orders. Chronicles, such as Paulo da Trindade's *Conquista Spiritual Do Oriente* and Fernão de Queiroz's *The Temporal and Spiritual Conquest of Ceylon* provide an extensive list of Portuguese missionary churches that were built by the first half of the seventeenth century. Boudens in his study *The Catholic Church in Ceylon under Dutch Rule* lists over 160 Portuguese churches and chapels that existed at the end of Portuguese occupation in Sri Lanka.¹

The Dutch rule of Sri Lanka commenced with the expulsion of the Portuguese in the middle of the seventeenth century. "After the occupation of the Island by the Dutch, Catholicism, which during the long Portuguese occupation had taken a strong hold on the population, was proscribed by law and a systematic and prolonged persecution by the Dutch authorities almost led to the

1 Robrecht Boudens, *The Catholic Church in Ceylon under Dutch Rule* (Rome: Catholic Book Agency, 1957).

elimination of the Catholic element from the wealthier and more influential classes of the population.”² This period of persecution therefore can be considered as the “dark days” of the history of the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka. It is evident that during the early period of Dutch occupation the most of the churches that the Portuguese built were either demolished or modified to accommodate their newly established Dutch Reformed faith. Lewcock describes this situation as follows: “...for the first hundred years of their occupation the Dutch were content to convert the dozen of Portuguese churches to the use of the Dutch Reformed faith. The buildings were often re-decorated, and sometimes given entirely new façades.”³ In sum, it is evident that the Dutch occupation of Sri Lanka “acted as a weighty agent of destruction of the Portuguese-built religious heritage throughout the island.”⁴

However, the Dutch campaign to convince the native population to convert to their faith was not very successful. This emphatic rejection of Protestant spirituality in Sri Lanka contributed greatly to the success of the missionary work of members of the *Congregação do Oratório de Santa Cruz dos Milagres de Goa*,⁵ “staffed by the Catholic Brahmans from Goa who become both missionaries and precocious Orientalists in Sri Lanka,”⁶ when they stealthily entered the island in the late seventeenth

2 Laurence Hyde, O.S.B., *A Short Historical Review of the Sylvestrine Monks in Ceylon from 1845 to 1920* (originally published in 1920, available at <http://www.osbsrilanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/A-Short-Historical-Review-by-Fr.-Lawrence-Hyde-OSB.pdf>) 9.

3 Ronald Lewcock, “Dutch Architecture in Sri Lanka,” in *Illustrations and Views of Dutch Ceylon 1602–1796*, ed. R. K. de Silva and W. G. M. Beumer (London: Serendib Publications, 1988) 122–125, at 122.

4 Helder Carita, “South India / Sri Lanka,” in *Portuguese Heritage around the World: Architecture and Urbanism, Vol. 2: Asia Oceania*, ed. Walter Rossa (Lisbon: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2011) 337–355, at 349.

5 The Congregation of the Oratory of the Cross of Miracles or the Oratory of Goa was the only Oratorian community established in Asia. It was the first indigenous religious congregation to be founded in a mission country. Its unique work consisted in providing exclusively Asian missionaries for a mission territory comprising a whole country for the first time in mission history.

6 Angela Barreto Xavier and Ines G. Županov, *Catholic Orientalism: Portuguese Empire, Indian Knowledge (16th–18th Centuries)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) 118.

century. This era of missionary history of Sri Lanka was started by the first Oratorian, Joseph Vaz in 1687 and ended with the death of the last Oratorian, Mathes Caetano in 1874.

Like other innovative missionary methods used to build a truly local church by adapting to indigenous culture and tradition in the fields of devotional literature, drama and other forms of religious art, the Oratorians' involvement in restoration and reconstruction of territorial network of Catholic churches played a vital role in their missionary endeavors on the island during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The origin and the development of the network of Oratorian churches in Sri Lanka can be distinguished into two periods: first, the Dutch period, dating from the arrival of first Oratorian in 1687 to the British takeover of the island from the Dutch in 1796; secondly, the British period, from the advent of British in 1796 to the death of the last Oratorian in the island in 1874.

2. EARLY CHURCHES OF THE ORATORIAN MISSION

Vaz's first and most secure field of work was the Kingdom of Kandy, where he gradually won the favour of King Vimaladharmasuriya II (ruled 1687–1707) so that he could make it the centre of his apostolic work (see Illustration 1). He was soon followed by other members of the Oratory of Goa. Županov notes:

For the first ten years of his solitary apostolate, Vaz established mission stations according to the particular geo-political division of the island. While most of the low-laying maritime territories were with the Dutch East India Company, the forest and the mountain areas around Kandy belonged to the king Vimaladharmasuriya II. There was a sea of mistrust between these two political units which enabled Vaz to break the Dutch religious embargo on Catholicism throughout the island.⁷

It can be assumed that at the advent of the Oratorians in the island the number of Catholic churches was close to zero. First “he built a small church in the city (of Kandy) ... unconsciously pav-

⁷ Ines G. Županov, “Goan Brahmans in the Land of Promise: Missionaries, Spies and Gentiles in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century in Sri Lanka,” in *Re-exploring the Links: History and Constructed Histories between Portugal and Sri Lanka*, ed. Jorge Flores (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007) 171-210, at 193.



Illustration 1: Geo-political division of Sri Lanka during Dutch rule.

ing the way for the building of a public church.”⁸ Boudens confirms that, “In all localities where circumstances permitted, Father Vaz erected chapels. A great number were built in the realm of Kandy due to the freedom of public worship which existed within its boundaries. In Dutch territory it was sometimes possible,

8 Vito Perniola, *The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka: The Dutch Period, Vol. 1: 1658–1711* (Dehiwala: Tisara Prakasakayo, reprint 2005, first published 1983) 80.

if influential Catholics were at the head of the community, to erect a chapel.”⁹

However, in the course of the time, under very trying circumstances, Vaz’s companions and successors built a number of churches and chapels in both territories. Catholic communities on the southwest coast (Kalutara, Colombo, Negombo, Puttalam, Mannar and Mantota) and on the eastern coast (Trincomalee, Kottiyar and Batticaloa, and Jaffna) were each accompanied by an Oratorian. Joseph de Menezes, the priest-in-charge of Puttalam “built twenty chapels in as many villages.”¹⁰ The chronicle of 1704 further reports that he “erected more than twenty chapels in the cities of Colombo and Negombo and in the districts under the Dutch.”¹¹ Pedro Ferrão, the priest-in-charge of Mantota, “was busy building chapels in the villages of the Christians ... at Mantota and Vanni. He also built the church at Sillena Madhu in the jungles of Vanni”¹² and gave “directions to the Christians who were building the chapels in each village.”¹³ Likewise in the mission of Negombo two churches had been constructed in Wellawala and Kammala, and other Catholics who settled along the river Maha Oya had built three chapels. The Oratorian reports of 1707 listed about nine chapels in the mission of Kalutara, which consisted of two in Beruwala, two in Maggona, one in Paiyagala, two in Kalamulla and one in Kalutara. Similarly, in an incredibly short span of time Oratorians had re-established the Catholic mission stations to its former strength. By the year 1717 “Roman Catholics were in possession of 400 Churches in all parts of Ceylon, while the Dutch Presbyterians had barely one forth the number of either congregations or converts.”¹⁴

9 Boudens, *The Catholic Church in Ceylon under Dutch Rule*, 175.

10 Perniola, *The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka: The Dutch Period*, Vol. I, 149.

11 Ibid., 263.

12 Ibid., 213.

13 Ibid., 214.

14 James Emerson Tennent, *Christianity in Ceylon* (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, reprint 1998, first published in London, 1850) 53.

3. ARCHITECTURAL MODELS OF THE ORATORIAN CHURCH DURING THE DUTCH PERIOD

A study of the available descriptions in Oratorian missionary records of the churches built at the beginning of Dutch persecution suggest the emergence of two types peculiar to the geo-political divisions of the island. In most low-lying maritime territories under Dutch administration the buildings were small “private or secret chapels”—necessarily temporary structures while in contrast, the large “public churches”—more solid and greater in scale were located in the territories of the Kandyan Kingdom.¹⁵

Within the Dutch territories, where persecution was moderate due to their locality, “people mostly assembled in “godowns” a store house type of structure unlikely to attract attention”¹⁶ of the Dutch. However, “in spite of the continual vigilance and prohibitions of the heretics, secret chapels are found everywhere.”¹⁷ An Oratorian missionary report describes the internal characteristics of those chapels thus:

...the altars of some chapels are a table with one or two steps; others consist merely of a plank supported by four pitch-forks. All their equipment consists of one or two cloths used as canopy over the place where Mass is celebrated, and or some wooden candlesticks. As regards the linen of the church, the Christian bring their own cloth to use them as canopy over the altar.¹⁸

On the other hand, considering the chapels around the urbanised territories where the security procedures were high, “there is not one which really is a church, for in the cities of Colombo, Negombo, Mannar, Kalutara, Galle and Matara, the houses of chief Catholics serve as chapels.”¹⁹

15 Sagara Jayasinghe, “Nineteenth-Century Catholic Church Architecture in Sri Lanka: Evolution of a Tropical Model,” in *Proceedings of the ID@50 Integrated Design Conference 2016*, ed. Stephen Emmitt and Kemi Adeyeye (Bath: University of Bath, 2016) 291–302, at 294.

16 Boudens, *The Catholic Church in Ceylon under Dutch Rule*, 175.

17 Vito Perniola, *The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka: The Dutch Period, Vol. II: 1712–1746* (Dehiwala: Tisara Prakasakayo, 1983) 81.

18 Vito Perniola, *The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka: The British Period, Vol. I: 1795–1844*, 2nd edn (Dehiwala: Tisara Prakasakayo, 2012) 46.

19 Perniola, *The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka: The Dutch Period, Vol. II*, 407.

The mission in the territories of the Kandyan Kingdom included many chapels among them were, a number of public churches, “where the missionary remains longer and where are the feasts are celebrated with great concourse of Christians coming even from distant places and from those subject to the Dutch.”²⁰ According to the references the public churches were generally of a considerable size and solidly built. Three public churches had been built by 1704, located in Kandy, Puttalam and Vanni.²¹ By the year 1723 this number increased to seven including the churches located at Narangodde, Batticoloa, Cottiar and Kuruvikkulam.²² The church of Kurivikulam was known as “the best in the island” during this period. By the year 1746, when the Oratorians were banished from Kandy, “there were eleven public churches. These had enough altars, were clean and equipped with ornaments and other necessary appeal for the Sacrifice of the Mass. ... two of them²³ were built in the form of monasteries with sufficient accommodation to house the missionaries.”²⁴

3.1 EXPANSION OF THE NETWORK OF CHURCHES

In a review made by the Dutch governor and his political council on March 18, 1729, a record was made of the number and locations of churches and chapels built by the Oratorians in the island. It is recorded that there were about thirteen churches and chapels in the territories of the Kingdom of Kandy, which were located in Wellawala (a chapel), Kiriyanakalli (a chapel), Maripo (a chapel), Palavi (a chapel), Kuruvikkulam (a chapel), Puttalam (a large church and a chapel), Pallakandal (a large church and a chapel), Maniyamgama (a large church and a chapel), Kudremalai (a large church), Mutur (a large church) and Tandavanvely (a large church). Regarding the churches and chapels traced in the Dutch territory, apart from a large church in Vanni other chapels were located in Colombo (outside the Kayman’s gate), Negombo (Hunupitiya), around Mantota (Nanaddan, Perinkalli, Vidattal-

20 Perniola, *The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka: The Dutch Period*, Vol. I, 321.

21 Ibid, 264.

22 Perniola, *The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka: The Dutch Period*, Vol. II, 140.

23 Religious houses at Puttalam and Bolawatte.

24 Vito Perniola, *The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka: The Dutch Period*, Vol. III: 1747–1795 (Dehiwala: Tisara Prakasakayo, 1985) 443.

tivu, Fort of Mannar, Sampaturai, Erukkalampiddi and Karisal), in Kayts island (Allaipiddi, Mandaitivu and Narantanai) and around Jaffna (Kilali, Sillalai, Matakal, Pandateruppu, Parrider, Puloli, Punalai-kadduvan, Varuttaivilan, Atchuvveli and Alambil).²⁵

When in 1746 both the Dutch and the religious and political leaders of Kandy made common cause and drove the Oratorians out of the Kandyan Kingdom, it is documented that there were about twenty churches in the territories of the kingdom: in Kandy, Sitavaca, Cottiar, Batticoloa, Sorikalmunai, Maripo, Puttalam, Kuruvikkulam, Allambil, Vellavallym, Vanni, Narangodde, Pudducuddirupu, Vellaque, Manacanna, Vahakotte, Galgama, Ottepettym and Bolavatta.²⁶

After banishment of the Oratorians from the Kingdom of Kandy, their missionary activities were confined to almost exclusively the low-lying maritime territories. Later with the substantial relaxation in the religious policy of the Dutch during the last decades of their rule, the Oratorians had more access to the propagation of the network of churches and freedom to exercise their construction campaign. During the period from 1760 to 1776, considerable liberties were obtained by the Catholics of various large towns.²⁷ The mission report of May 1779 confirms this: "In the course of last few years, various churches have been built ... for the greater convenience of the missionaries. There is a fairly large church in Colombo, one each in Galle, Kalutara, Kalpitiya, Chilaw and Pesalai."²⁸

The mission report of May 1793 provides a list of the total number of chapels in the various mission stations thus: Alutkuru Korale – seventeen chapels, city of Jaffna and its surroundings – sixteen chapels, Colombo and Gurubevila – twenty one chapels, Valikamam and the island of Kayts – twenty eight chapels, Negombo – sixteen chapels, Mannar and Vanny – forty one chapels, Galle and Matara – two chapels, Tempattu and Vadapattu – sixty one chapels, Batticoloa and Trincomalee – eleven chapels, Vadamarachchi and Pacchilaipalli – thirty three chapels, Moratuwa

25 Perniola, *The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka: The Dutch Period*, Vol. II, 204–207.

26 Ibid, 481.

27 Hyde, *A Short Historical Review*, 11.

28 Perniola, *The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka: The Dutch Period*, Vol. III, 349.

and Kalutara – nineteen chapels and Chilaw, Puttalama and Kalpitiya – twenty four chapels.²⁹

3.2 ADVENT OF THE BRITISH AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

With the advent of the British and the grant of freedom in 1806 revoking the bans on Catholicism that had been enforced by the Dutch, the Oratorians had free access to the Catholic communities. This resulted in more opportunity for their expansion of the network of churches. As far as the expansion of churches is concerned, the Oratorian mission report of October 1826 minutes: "...at present in the island there are many churches, besides those which are being built in Candia (Kandy) where, with the permission of the British authority, we have started a new mission. Such churches are many, spacious, very well kept."³⁰ Vito Perniola endorses the above fact by supplying a comprehensive account over 280 churches and chapels that were constructed by the second decade of the nineteenth century with their respective locations and the dedications.³¹

From 1832 the Oratorians had full religious freedom and unlimited access to Catholics throughout the island. As a result the Catholics boldly came out into the open and the number of prominent Catholics increased all over. Dep observes that "since more and more Catholics would have surfaced all over, the places of worship would have become insufficient and hopelessly inadequate. Therefore the highest priority would have been given to the enlarging of chapels and the building of new churches."³² As Carita writes, "this involved the construction of new churches and the restoration of the old ones, with the collateral effect of a new growth in Portuguese influence on religious architecture that was transmitted via Goan architecture rather than as a direct Portuguese influence."³³

29 Ibid, 514–515.

30 Perniola, *The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka: The British Period*, Vol. I, 119.

31 See *ibid*, 123–131.

32 Arthur C. Dep, *The Oratorian Mission in Sri Lanka (1795–1874): Being a History of the Catholic Church, 1795–1874* (Ja-ela: Dep 1987) 14.

33 Helder Carita, "Portuguese-Influenced Religious Architecture in Ceylon: Creation, Types and Continuity," in *Re-exploring the Links: History and Constructed Histories between Portugal and Sri Lanka*, ed. Jorge Flores (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007) 261–278, at 273.

4. ARCHITECTURAL MODELS OF ORATORIAN CHURCHES AT THE BEGINNING OF THE BRITISH PERIOD

The detailed account of the varied missions of Oratorians³⁴ sent to the Sacred Congregation de Propaganda Fide in Rome by Caetano de Rosario, Vicar Apostolic of the island, on February 12, 1844, provides a good reflection about the architectural quality and expression of their churches and chapels. The overall observation of characteristics of the stated churches and chapels, suggests that there were two types of architectural models; one comprising of small chapels built in clay or stick and covered with thatch; the other consisting of larger churches built in rock or stone and covered with tiles. The prevalent poor circumstances and the conditions of the distant chapels, which were found in the rural territories exemplifies “the poverty of the churches and chapels of the island. From this it can be easily surmised how much the Christians must suffer since the majority of them live in fields and forests in abject misery and poverty. ... one can guess how little they can contribute to the upkeep of their churches.”³⁵

However, larger churches were constructed around the fortified towns where “it is not easily permitted for Catholics to build them inside the walls of the forts.”³⁶ The city of Colombo was an outstanding example where fourteen such churches were built outside the walls: the Cathedral Church of St. Lucia, the Church of Blessed Virgin Mary, the Church of St. Philip Neri, the Church of St. Anne, the Church of Blessed Virgin Mary of Refuge, the Church of St. Anthony, the Church of Our Lady of Sorrows, the Church of St. Andrew the Apostle, the Church of St. James the Apostle, the Church of St. John the Baptist, the Church of Blessed Virgin Mary, the Church of St. Sebastian, the Church of St. Joseph and the Church of Our Lady of the Rosary.³⁷ As mentioned earlier these churches were “built of rock and stones ... and covered with tiles,”³⁸ which reflected the wealth and influence of the Catholic community there. Other churches built outside the walls of the forts along the coastal area in the

34 For the full report see Perniola, *The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka: The British Period*, Vol. I, 420–431.

35 Ibid., 46.

36 Ibid., 415.

37 Ibid., 424.

38 Ibid., 416.

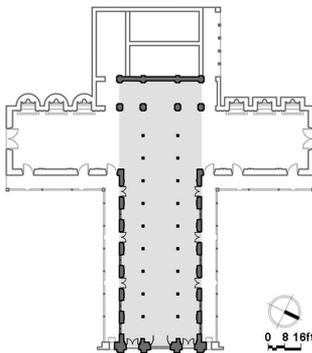


Illustration 2: Floor plan and interior view of St. Anne's Church, Palakuda.

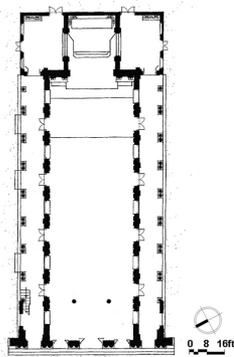


Illustration 3: Floor plan and interior view of St. John the Baptist Church, Mutwal.

island and dedications can be listed as: Matara (St. Anthony of Padua), Galle (Blessed Virgin Mary of the Rosary), Kalutara (St. Philip Neri), Negombo (St. Joseph), Chilaw (Virgin Mary), Puttalam (St. Anthony), Jaffna (Blessed Virgin Mary), Mannar (St. Sebastian), Trincomalee (Blessed Virgin Mary) and Batticoola (St. Anthony).

INDO-PORTUGUESE INFLUENCE

In the context of the architectural model of the larger churches built during later part of their mission, various Orato-

rian missionary reports highlight some influences of preceding Portuguese church models that had been consolidated over the previous centuries. This model was generally characterized by the introduction of two rows of wooden pillars or columns (instead of the masonry columns of Portuguese churches) in its nave to support the heavy timber roof construction, covered with clay tiles. In turn, this adaptation helps to expand the nave in terms of its width and the height. This advancement responded to the spatial needs of the growing congregations.³⁹ This is evident in such statement as “there were ... some spacious churches with a broad nave and two aisles, with sufficient furniture and equipment.”⁴⁰ This model of a nave and two aisles therefore seems to indicate the continuation of principle typology that was introduced by the Portuguese during their occupation. The nave of the present Church of St. Anne’s, Palakuda (present day Talavila) in the onetime mission station of Kalpitiya is one of the most notable examples for this model. Even though modern-day interventions complicate the identification of the original structure, one can still comprehend the architectural style of the Oratorians (see Illustration 2).

In the view of Indo-Portuguese influence, another architectural feature is revealed in the formation of churches with integration of two verandahs that run along the length of the side-walls of the nave, likewise found in Indo-Portuguese churches in South India. This particular model appears to have been developed by the Oratorians by the middle of the nineteenth century in response to the local environmental conditions and religious practices. This is clearly revealed in Oratorian sources thus: “On both sides there will be a verandah as long as the church itself.”⁴¹ This attempt marked the beginning of a symbolic development of an ideal architectural model that reflects more indigenous and tropical characteristics in the evolution of religious architecture in Sri Lanka.⁴² The model with side galleries in Sri Lanka may thus be related to a direct influence from South India. In terms

39 Jayasinghe, “Nineteenth-Century Catholic Church Architecture,” 296.

40 Perniola, *The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka: The British Period, Vol. I*, 87.

41 Ibid, 444.

42 See Jayasinghe, “Nineteenth-Century Catholic Church Architecture,” 296.

of its architecture the Church of St. John the Baptist, Mutwal can be considered the most interesting and the best-preserved building founded by the Oratorians during the last decades of their mission (See illustration 3).

5. CONCLUSION

The origin of the network of Oratorian missionary churches in Sri Lanka, which was initially carried out during the decisive period of Dutch persecution in eighteenth century, seems to have been influenced by their innovative missionary methods and its development can be characterized as hands-on architectural solutions adopted by them in response to very difficult political and economic conditions of the nineteenth century and certain aspects of Oriental religious practice and the environmental conditions of the island.

The evolution of these architectural models has been characterized by preceding Indo-Portuguese and the island's indigenous architecture. It worth noting that the origin and the development of Oratorian missionary churches in Sri Lanka reveal a continued existence of architectural traditions of Portuguese origin, especially regarding the spatial organization of church buildings.

As a final note, the progress of the Oratorian mission Sri Lanka in terms of their architectural campaign can be summed up in the words of a mid-nineteenth century observer: "there are 319 churches or chapels in the island, an astounding figure. ... Many of these churches by their neatness and purity of style of architecture compare very favourably with those of any nation of Europe."⁴³

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43 Quoted in Perniola, *The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka: The British Period*, Vol. I, 453.