

(Re)Contextualising the Venice Charter for the transcultural heritage of contested minorities: dilemmas in the preservation of Goan Oratorian churches in Sri Lanka

(Re)Contextualizando a Carta de Veneza para o património transcultural de minorias contestadas: dilemas na preservação das igrejas oratorianas goesas no Sri Lanka

JOAQUIM RODRIGUES DOS
SANTOS ^{1*} 
SAGARA JAYASINGHE ^{1,2} 

1. ARTIS – Institute of Art History, School of Arts and Humanities, University of Lisbon, Alameda da Universidade, 1600-214 Lisboa, Portugal
2. Department of Integrated Design, University of Moratuwa, Katubedda, Moratuwa 10400, Sri Lanka

*joaquimr.santos@letras.ulisboa.pt

Abstract

The study of Catholic minorities in Sri Lanka is complex and multifaceted owing to their unique identities shaped by centuries of colonialism, migration and cultural exchange, originating a transcultural heritage that presents a range of complexities for safeguarding. The architecture of the Oratorian churches established by Goan missionaries in Sri Lanka between the 17th and 19th centuries is perhaps the best example of transcultural heritage among the island's (often contested) Catholic minorities and is considered an exceptional and unique heritage that is nevertheless currently threatened. Drawing on practical experience, and subsequent debate, during preliminary visits to several sites in Sri Lanka with a view to identifying Oratorian churches as candidates for UNESCO's World Heritage Tentative List, this essay aims to address the dilemmas experienced, which highlight the need to (re)contextualise certain principles outlined in international heritage charters, especially concerning the preservation of transcultural heritage belonging to contested minorities.

Resumo

O estudo das minorias católicas no Sri Lanka é complexo e multifacetado devido às suas identidades únicas, moldadas por séculos de colonialismo, migração e intercâmbio cultural, dando origem a um património transcultural que apresenta uma série de complexidades para a sua salvaguarda. A arquitetura das igrejas oratorianas fundadas por missionários goeses no Sri Lanka, entre os séculos XVII e XIX, é talvez o melhor exemplo de património transcultural entre as minorias católicas (muitas vezes contestadas) da ilha e é considerada um património excecional e único que, no entanto, se encontra atualmente ameaçado. Com base na experiência prática e no debate subsequente durante visitas preliminares a vários locais no Sri Lanka com o objetivo de identificar igrejas oratorianas como candidatas à Lista Indicativa do Património Mundial da UNESCO, este ensaio visa abordar os dilemas vividos, que destacam a necessidade de (re)contextualizar certos princípios descritos nas cartas internacionais do património, especialmente no que diz respeito à preservação do património transcultural pertencente a minorias contestadas.

KEYWORDS

Sri Lankan Oratorian churches
Transcultural heritage
Contested minorities
Integrity and authenticity
Heritage charters

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Igrejas oratorianas do Sri Lanka
Património transcultural
Minorias contestadas
Integridade e autenticidade
Cartas do Património

Historical context

The Oratorian church architecture in Ceylon (today, Sri Lanka) began and was developed secretly during Dutch rule (1658-1796). Later, it evolved as a marginalised architectural tradition connected to the traditional pious practices and ethos of communities that were underprivileged due to casteism and the social stratum underpinning the political and social reformation during British rule (1806-1948). In the recent past, most of the remaining Goan Oratorian churches situated within the former battleground of the almost 30-year civil war (1983-2009), which was prolonged in northern Sri Lanka – where the highest percentage of Tamil Catholics live –, were totally or partially damaged and left either abandoned or in a dilapidated condition due to the communities' deprived state and displacement during the armed conflict. However, under the post-war reconstruction agendas, most affected churches are being restored, renovated or rebuilt, sometimes financed by the diaspora across distant seas, and are still in the process of being replaced with modern constructions, apparently without consultation regarding standard scientific conservation practices. Therefore, safeguarding this distinctive architectural tradition, which continued for over 250 years as a living tradition and hands-on response to the proselytising zeal of the local communities, has become a challenge today, primarily due to the post-war cultural, social and economic dynamics. Therefore, this paper aims to address some dilemmas overlooked in the principles set out in the Venice Charter, using as a case study the conservation of the Goan Oratorian architectural heritage in Sri Lanka.

The Goan Oratorian mission in Ceylon was founded by Fr Joseph Vaz, who was recently canonised for his fundamental role in revitalising the Catholic faith on the island. In 1687, he clandestinely arrived on the island to assist the remaining believers in proclaiming their Catholic faith. The Catholics had been abandoned during the rule of the Dutch, who imposed a ban on Roman Catholicism after expelling the missionaries operating under Portuguese rule (1505-1658), who had introduced Roman Catholicism to the native population. Fr Joseph Vaz was followed by other missionaries affiliated with the Oratorian congregation in Goa, which was mainly staffed by the native Catholic Brahman priests from the natural priestly caste of India. One of their first missionary fields was the Jaffna Peninsula, and later, from 1746, the mainland of Mannar became the centre of missionary operations until the beginning of British rule (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Map showing the Oratorian mission stations in Ceylon (source: Sagara Jayasinghe).

However, around the 1850s, the Ceylon mission field was divided into two “mission territories”: the Vicariate of Jaffna (or Northern Vicariate) and the Vicariate of Colombo (or Southern Vicariate). This development would enable the northern and southern Catholic populations to each re-establish their own social and cultural singularity, which they had lost to some extent under the new provincial administration of the British. For instance, in the Vicariate of Jaffna, the majority of Catholics began to assert their distinct Tamil cultural ethos and language and develop their own character inspired and strengthened by the traditional religious practices of Hinduism prevailing in their homeland.

Survey and documentation

After roughly three decades of civil war in northern Sri Lanka, the effects of the enormous destruction and the displacement of the native population haunted the region and produced a large Tamil diaspora residing mostly in countries like India, Canada, Norway and the United Kingdom. Tamil Christians constituted a significant Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora – for instance, most Tamil Christians who settled in Norway were Roman Catholics. This new “Catholic diaspora” became a critical component in facilitating efforts to restore, renovate or rebuild the war-ravaged churches in Sri Lanka (Figure 2). As observed while undertaking the survey and documentation of the remaining churches and field visits to the region, the Catholic diaspora was partially or fully financing many new constructions. The Catholic Church benefited from the generosity of the Catholic diaspora, in the form of funds from abroad, which would have resulted from this group’s religious and cultural memories scale compared with larger coastal Muslim cities.

Although the new Catholic diaspora provided significant support to sustain the churches in the post-war setting, it became evident that many church buildings, which had been fully or partially damaged and abandoned during the civil war, were renovated or repaired without regard for their religious and architectural origins. In some cases, churches were demolished to make way for new constructions, while others were abandoned due to the proximity of newly built churches (Figure 3). These remnants of the past and contemporary developments highlight the challenging task of prioritising the safeguarding of cultural and religious heritage in post-war environments. These changes often take precedence in the aftermath of war or counterinsurgency, overshadowing the need to rebuild and restore cultural heritage.



Figure 2. Inside of St James’ Church in Gurunagar, Jaffna, in 1993 after the aerial bombing during the civil war (1983-2009) (source: courtesy of the Parish Priest, St James’ Church in Gurunagar).



Figure 3. Holy Rosary Church in Palayadipudikulam, Mannar, in 2018 during its demolition, while the new church was being constructed in front of it (photo: Joaquim Rodrigues dos Santos).



Figure 4. Awareness-raising action at Our Lady of Victory Church in Pesalai, Mannar, in 2018 (photo: Sagara Jayasinghe).

In 2018, the research project “Oratorians in Ceylon: Survey of Oratorian churches with Portuguese influence in Sri Lanka” was initiated, funded by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. As the project was getting underway, the disappearance of this unique heritage connected to Oratorian churches was noticeable. The “Oratorians in Ceylon” project allowed for the unveiling, surveying and sharing of this heritage [1-2], which was previously virtually unknown. More importantly, it yielded a series of awareness-raising actions to safeguard this heritage: besides several talks with local and national stakeholders (community, religious and political leaders, technicians and also common people) in Sri Lanka, an itinerant exhibition, “Edifices in Dark Days: Architectural Heritage of Goan Oratorian Missionary Churches in Sri Lanka”, was held and a booklet in Tamil was distributed among the local Catholic communities in northern Sri Lanka [3] (Figure 4). Several interviews were also carried out on Sri Lankan social media, intending to reach the maximum number of people [4-5]. These actions not only halted the processes of demolition, distortion or ruin threatening the churches but also potentiated their classification as heritage, leading to the creation of a commission to assess the candidacy of Sri Lankan Oratorian churches for inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List.

Heritage dilemmas

The intention to nominate the Goan Oratorian churches in Sri Lanka for inclusion on UNESCO’s World Heritage Tentative List prompted the creation of a working committee to prepare the application for tentative listing. This working committee, comprising Sri Lankan and Portuguese experts, had the support of the Central Cultural Fund, one of the principal heritage management institutions in Sri Lanka, as well as government backing. The working committee immediately launched a field mission aimed at assessing the conservation condition of the Oratorian churches, selecting those eligible for candidature, evaluating necessary safeguarding actions and engaging various stakeholders in this heritage endeavour.

Visits were made to almost two dozen Oratorian churches scattered along the coastal territory from Colombo to Jaffna, with two additional focal points on the east coast (Trincomalee and Batticaloa). After analysing all situations and considering several inherent circumstances, the working committee presented a preliminary list of five Oratorian churches considered the most significant ones in terms of heritage value (historical importance and integrity condition): Our Lady of Assumption Church in Parappankandal (Mannar), the former headquarters of the Goan Oratorian mission in Sri Lanka; St Bartholomew’s Church in Olaithuduvai (Mannar), possibly the oldest surviving Oratorian church; St James’ Church in Kilali (Jaffna), owing to its ethnographic and anthropological significance; St Joseph’s Church in Kanthankulam (Mannar); and St Anne’s Church in Keerimalai (Jaffna). The latter two exemplify Oratorian churches remodelled by the Congregation of Oblates (the successors to the Goan Oratorians in these regions), showcasing the enduring presence of the Goan Oratorian typology (Figure 5).

It became apparent during this field mission that although the demolition of Oratorian churches had been suspended, many were nonetheless slowly abandoned or subjected to detrimental alterations due to recent construction projects. Indeed, the churches of Olaithuduvai, Kanthankulam and Kilali were not demolished when new churches were built nearby, as was previously the common practice; but they gradually deteriorated due to lack of use and resources for their maintenance. Regarding the churches in Parappankandal and Keerimalai, recent interventions somewhat altered their value. It was evident that all five churches would require substantial restoration work before the candidature submission, with three of them (in Olaithuduvai, Kanthankulam and Kilali) urgently needing repairs and consolidation to prevent their partial collapse.

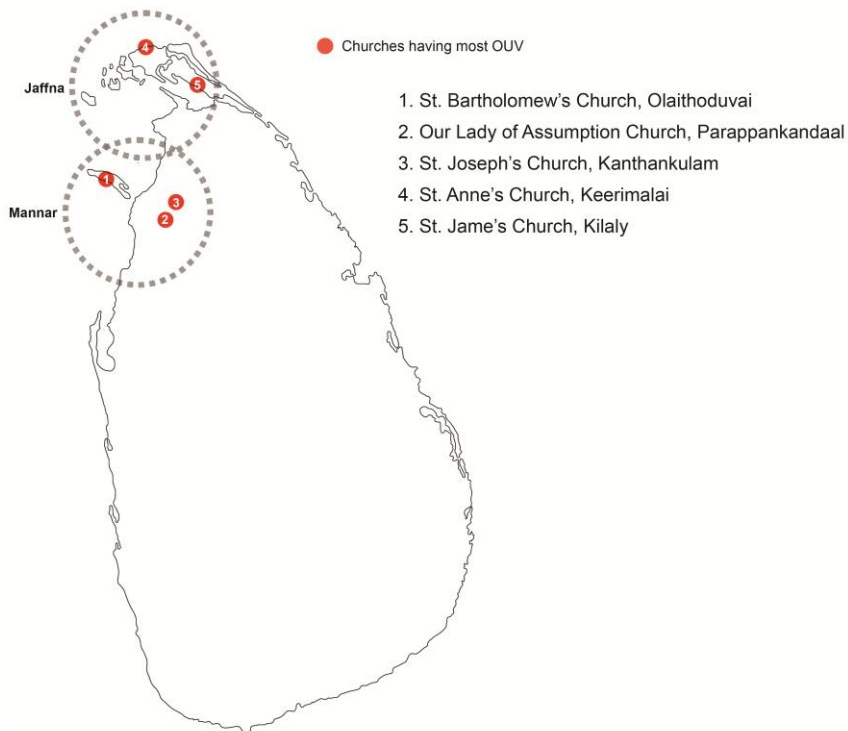


Figure 5. Proposed churches to be included on UNESCO's World Heritage Tentative List (source: Sagara Jayasinghe).

It was precisely during this field mission that several dilemmas and challenges arose regarding the classification and heritage preservation of these churches, stemming not only from cultural differences among the various experts involved but also from the socio-economic and political circumstances or the need to recontextualise principles associated with various international heritage charters. These dilemmas continue to be debated in an attempt to reach a broad consensus that will enable the UNESCO tentative listing candidature to proceed.

Socio- economic and political circumstances

The UNESCO heritage classification is usually viewed very positively by the various entities involved in the process, from the local communities to political, religious and economic entities. Indeed, besides the pride of possessing internationally recognised cultural heritage, the classification signifies enhanced protection and increased economic activity (especially pilgrimage and tourism) that generates revenue, as many studies have shown [6-10].

However, numerous challenges immediately arose in this regard. Sri Lanka has several sites classified by UNESCO as World Heritage Sites, located predominantly in the central and southern parts of the island with majority Sinhalese populations (Figure 6). In fact, with the exception of the historic city of Galle, of colonial origin, all the others are connected to archaeological sites of ancient city centres of magnificent civilisation inspired by the ethos of Buddhism (although some Tamil Hindu influences from the Chola empire can be also found in Polonnaruwa) [11]. Indeed, as has happened in many other parts of the world, there seems to be a kind of ideologically driven tendency in state-sponsored parts of the Sri Lankan heritage sector to prioritise monuments belonging to the majority. The Sinhalese majority tend to be blamed of political dominance by some strata of Sri Lanka's minorities, negatively affecting them and leading to their marginalisation; a significant consequence of this bias would be the alleged deliberate neglect of the heritage of these minorities. The openness of national heritage institutions to analyse the classification of the Oratorian churches is therefore a step to choose a heritage that does not belong to the areas where the Sinhalese Buddhist majority resides.

However, here arose the first challenge. While solid support for the classification of Oratorian churches was expected from the northern Tamil communities, as these could potentially become the first case of classified cultural heritage in the northern region of the island, which is predominantly Tamil, questions arose among community members as to why religious monuments belonging to the Hindu majority in this region would not qualify for classification first; why was it instead religious monuments belonging to the Catholic minority?

The societal wounds have not yet healed owing to the social, religious, cultural and economic issues facing the two prominent ethnic communities in Sri Lanka (southern Sinhalese and northern Tamils), which led to a nearly three-decade-long armed conflict, despite its end about 15 years ago. The fact that the candidature of the Oratorian churches, originating from Catholic roots often associated with colonialism, has institutional support, appears to many Tamils as a deliberate provocation – despite the proposed churches for classification all belonging to Tamil Catholic communities. The many talks with Sri Lankan stakeholders during the field mission revealed that one reason why no Hindu Tamil heritage sites in the north have yet been considered for classification in Sri Lanka lies in their lack of uniqueness and exceptionality compared to other Tamil Hindu heritage sites in neighbouring Tamil Nadu (India) – where notable and unique Hindu monuments classified by UNESCO exist, such as the Great Living Chola Temples in Thanjavur, Gangaikonda Cholapuram and Darasuram [12]. This divergence reveals the challenges of preserving and classifying the heritage of Tamil Catholics, made doubly difficult because it belongs to a minority (Catholics) within another minority (Tamils).

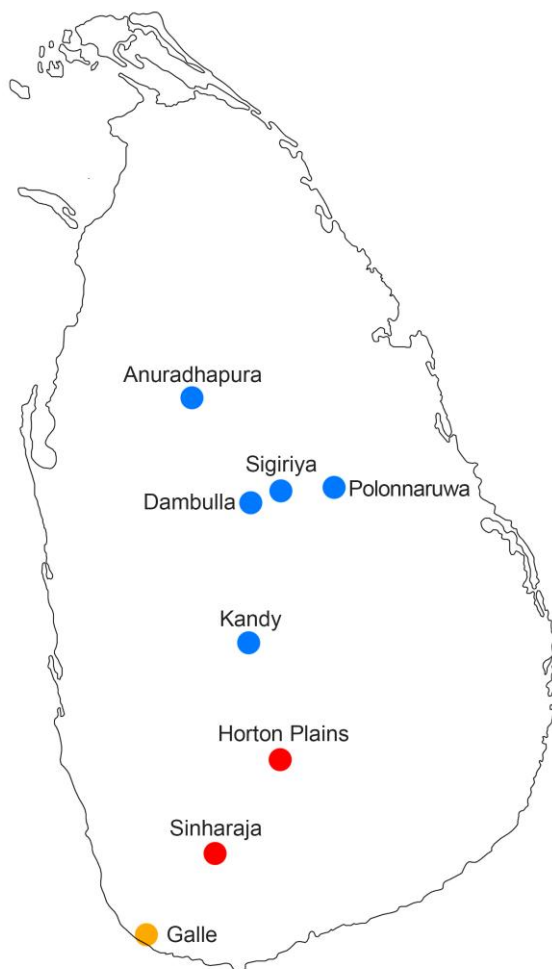


Figure 6. World Heritage Sites in Sri Lanka: cultural heritage sites in blue, natural heritage sites in red and a colonial heritage site in yellow (source: Sagara Jayasinghe).

Even among the Sinhalese, doubts exist regarding the classification of Oratorian churches: since the Sri Lankan Catholic community is transversal to both island societies, with Sinhalese and Tamil believers, there are some questions among the Sinhalese majority concerning why only the churches of Tamil Catholics were chosen for potential classification by UNESCO, when there are also Oratorian churches in areas currently populated by the Sinhalese majority, which includes Catholic communities. These questions persist despite the explanations that the integrity of these Oratorian churches in Sinhalese majority areas is manifestly insufficient for classification when compared to their counterparts in the Tamil majority northern region. There are also arguments that the Sinhalese Catholic churches are more magnificent, and therefore at least one of them should be included in the candidature as a counterpoint to the Oratorian churches of the Tamil Catholics. The problem is that these larger Sinhalese churches are not of Oratorian origin, thus disqualifying them for the nomination. Moreover, they do not have any outstanding universal value in accordance with the criteria defined by UNESCO – like the Tamil Hindu temples on the north of the island, there are Catholic churches much more outstanding and unique than those of the Sinhalese Catholics, despite their substantial cultural interest.

It should also be noted that in recent years, there has been a slight increase in hostility towards the Sri Lankan Catholic minority from some extremist sectors of the Sinhalese Buddhist population, among which hegemonic post-colonial speeches and anti-colonial feelings are significant [13-16]. These Catholic minorities are frequently viewed as outsiders by some strata of the majority population since many trace their identity to the painful colonial period, leading to a complex relationship between Christianity and colonialism – some people view Christianity as a symbol of colonial oppression, possibly jeopardising the Sri Lankan Catholic heritage preservation as it becomes intensely contested. Other Sri Lankan minorities also express mistrust of Catholics [17-18] (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Debris at St Sebastian's Church in Katuwapitiya, Negombo, after the Easter Sunday bombing, 2019 (source: Anadolu Agency – Getty Images).

Returning to the reservations expressed by Tamil populations regarding the classification of Oratorian churches, despite the openness to the need to preserve this unique heritage, a sense of distrust persists from the highest Catholic hierarchy – namely, the bishops – down to the common believer, due to a clear misunderstanding of current heritage laws. Unlike the common practice in many Western societies, where the heritage classification of a building is executed by the state regardless of the owner's wishes (if the monument is private), the heritage classification in Sri Lanka is carried out only with the explicit agreement of the respective owners [19]. This makes the classification process more cumbersome and generally more difficult to achieve for private buildings as their owners usually do not relinquish the prerogative to carry out any desired works on these properties.

In fact, in cases where private buildings are classified as monuments, their owners can no longer undertake any type of work beyond maintenance; repair, rehabilitation or expansion works are only allowed with the state's approval and are carried out under its strict supervision. This restriction is sometimes viewed by monument owners as a loss of ownership, and in the case of the Oratorian churches, this misconception is exacerbated by the sentiments of a Catholic minority that sometimes feels contested. In the Tamil context, such fears are supported by recent classification processes of ancient Buddhist structures in the northern part of the island that were already abandoned, such as the Nagadeepa Purana Vihara (currently recovered and well-functioning) or the Ancient Kantharodai Viharaya. These structures have been appropriated by Sinhalese Buddhists from the central and southern parts of the island under the pretext that as they are ancient Buddhist temples, they are only returning to their rightful owners and users [20-21]. However, it is widely known – specially within the Tamil minority – that these temples were built by Tamil Buddhists, who have since converted to Hinduism [22-25].

Awareness-raising actions between the highest levels of the Sri Lankan Catholic Church and the leaders of Catholic communities have revealed a gradual openness to the classification of the Oratorian churches. Ultimately, there is an understanding that not only is the ownership of classified monuments not revoked but their protection is actually enhanced as the classification prohibits actions that might distort them or interventions within their protected areas that might alter their character, preventing also land encroachment by other non-Catholic communities. Being classified monuments may also mean easier access to funds for their conservation. However, the issue of classification persists within the community at large, which fears losing the freedom to carry out renovation or expansion works on monuments according to their desires.

Hesitation concerning UNESCO's classification criteria

The issue of work carried out on Oratorian churches without proper oversight by heritage intervention specialists has significantly contributed to the distortion of these unique buildings, particularly the churches of Parappankandal and Keerimalai. Furthermore, when communities lose interest in maintaining these churches, they immediately begin to deteriorate and are at risk of collapse and ruin, as can be observed in the churches of Olaithuduvai, Kanthankulam and Kilali (Figure 8). The debate over the potential reversal (or not) of the degraded or distorted state of these churches, with a view to their future classification, has sparked intense debates, sometimes with diametrically opposed views that reflect, to some extent, heritage approaches derived from distinct cultural sensitivities – either between Sri Lankan communities or even with foreigners.



Figure 8. The poor condition of: a) St James' Church in Kilali (Jaffna); b) St Joseph's Church in Kanthankulam (Mannar) (photos: Sagara Jayasinghe).

Regarding the UNESCO criteria for the assessment of Outstanding Universal Value [26], it is apparent that the humble Sri Lankan Oratorian churches do not represent “a masterpiece of human creative genius”, nor are they “an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble which illustrates a significant stage in human history”; they are also not “an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment”. However, they can be considered to fall within the criterion of “being directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance”, while also “exhibit[ing] an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world”.

There is no disagreement on the above criteria. However, regarding the criterion “bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilisation which is living or which has disappeared”, although there is major agreement that the Oratorian churches satisfy this criterion, there are divergent ways in which it is understood. Notwithstanding the simplicity of the Oratorian churches, their history is truly remarkable and unique in the world; the question that arose is whether the Oratorian churches fall within the category of living heritage or if they have already disappeared. To the argument that the Oratorian congregation's disbandment in the mid-nineteenth century makes this heritage a testimony to a cultural tradition that has already disappeared, there is also the argument that this cultural tradition remains alive through the Catholic communities that still exist and use these churches, since the disappearance of the Goan Oratorians did not mean the end of Sri Lankan Catholic communities.

(Theoretical-) Practical issues of intervention

The debate on potential interventions aimed at restoring, correcting or reversing the situations of the Oratorian churches selected for UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List candidature has been lively. The issues raised are diverse, extending beyond a presumed East–West cultural debate and encompassing political-religious, socio-economic, technical, sustainability and authenticity-integrity perspectives.

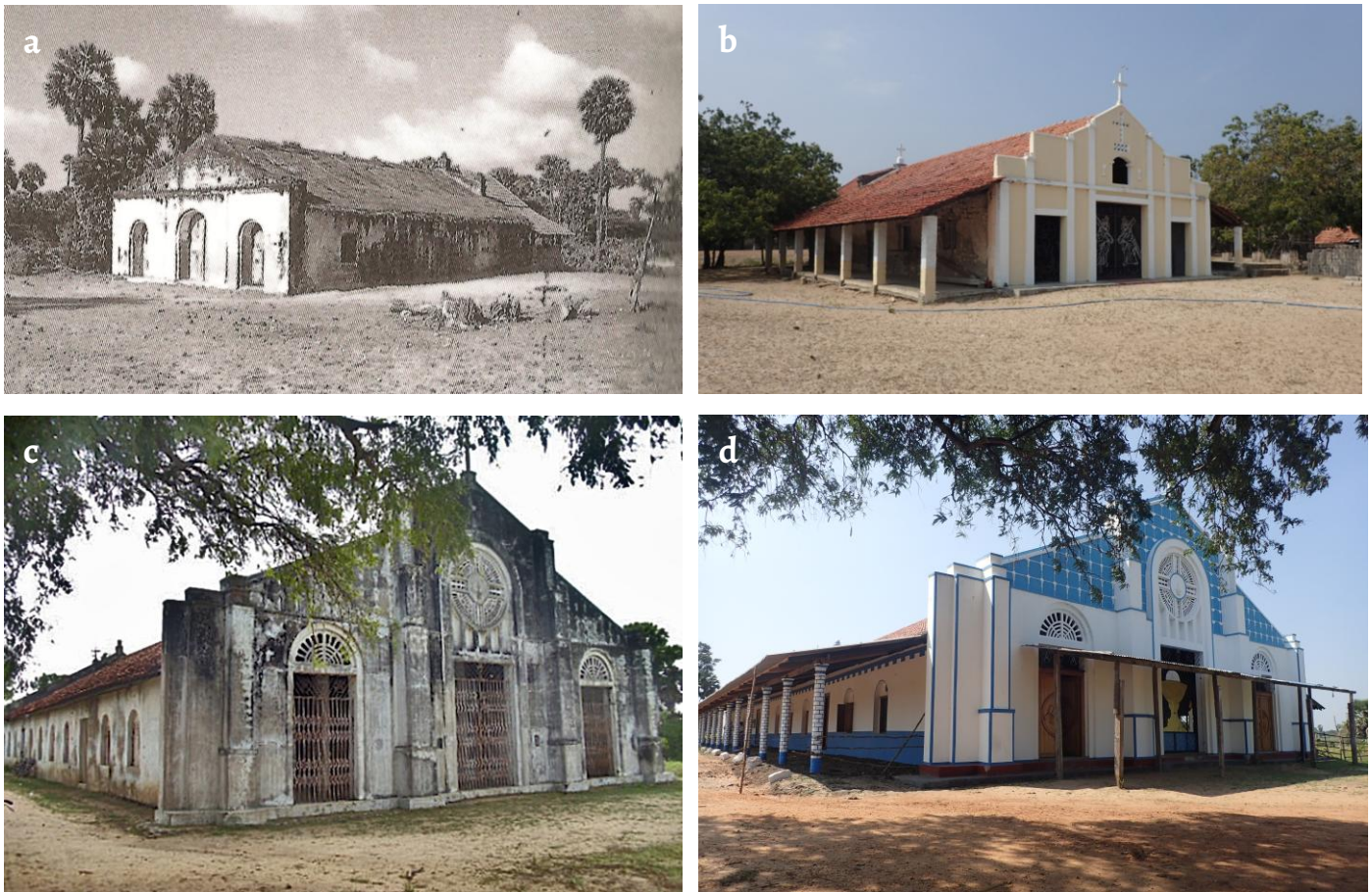


Figure 9. Examples of two churches in Mannar, where additional value has even been added: St Bartholomew's Church in Olaithuduvai: a) in the 1970s; and b) the 2020s (source: Lewcock, Sansoni and Senanayake [28]; photo: Joaquim Rodrigues dos Santos); and Our Lady of Assumption Church in Parappankandal: c) 2016; d) 2018 (photos: Sagara Jayasinghe and Joaquim Rodrigues dos Santos).

The churches of Parappankandal, Olaithuduvai, Kanthankulam, Kilali and Keerimalai were all built during the first half of the nineteenth century and follow an architectural typology and ancestral construction techniques used in all Oratorian churches built by Goan priests [1, 27]. However, these churches have undergone alterations over time. For instance, almost all the original façades of these churches were subsequently replaced by others aligning more closely with the aesthetics of their respective eras. Some had front porches or side verandas built to mitigate extreme weather effects (heat or monsoon rains). In addition, in various churches that transitioned to the French Oblates (the successors to the Goan Oratorians in the northern missions) after the cessation of Goan Oratorian activity, the roofing of the chancel was raised. This often involved the use of new materials, considered then more efficient than the traditional ones.

However, this may not imply a loss of authenticity in these churches, as historic buildings have generally undergone changes over time to adapt to new living (or religious, in this case) functions, uses, aesthetics or more efficient technologies – without necessarily implying a loss of their heritage value. Sometimes, additional value has even been added to these buildings, meaning that they continued to be used over time, rather than being abandoned and falling into ruin.

The question relating to this matter concerns the boundaries between what would be considered acceptable to maintain and what would be unacceptable and could be removed/changed. For example, the side verandas of the Olaithuduvai church (Figure 9a-b), while not original, were considered acceptable to retain, whereas those of the Parappankandal church (Figure 9c-d), built more recently, were considered somewhat spurious – and this is despite the aesthetic language of both churches matching, although the building materials are different (especially in Parappankandal). This seems to suggest that the argument of antiquity,

more than aesthetics or functionality, may have been the determining factor in establishing the churches' respective value and, with that, stipulating their maintenance or eventual removal. However, this would also imply enquiring about how long something needs to exist to be considered old enough to be preserved.

A couple of decades ago, the wooden columns supporting the roof of the Parappankandal church were replaced by reinforced concrete columns (Figure 10a). In a way, the planimetry and the roof structure were maintained, with only the replacement of an older material with something newer and (considered) more durable. The replacement of old materials with newer ones, while maintaining the forms and aspects, is a relatively common situation in various parts of the East (but also in the West, albeit on a smaller scale), without losing, for those cultures, their authenticity. The maintenance of the original matter and the signs of antiquity (demonstrative of its antiquity), strongly associated with Western cultures, does not have the same associations in several other cultures [29-32].

In the Parappankandal church, therefore, the replacement of wooden columns with reinforced concrete columns represents a kind of natural process within the Sri Lankan culture. Its maintenance would theoretically be acceptable in a context where this continuous updating of buildings is inherent to that same local culture. However, increasing influences from Western cultures clash with this brutalist view of the reinforced concrete columns, and therefore the proposition of reversing the reinforced concrete columns to recover the wooden columns, as they originally were, arises.

The problem is that this replacement, by itself, does not guarantee the authenticity of the structure, since the new wooden columns are not historicised (it is just the replacement of a new material with another new material, although similar to the original), and instead contradicts this natural development of replacing wood with reinforced concrete. In fact, this action could even lead to the creation of a falsehood, as it would obliterate part of the building's history and could historicise the columns with an antiquity value that they would not have. However, the situation of this replacement may still be considered, as there still exists in smaller environments a tradition of working with wood, inclusively in religious buildings, by repairing or substituting parts of wooden structures in a poor condition. The placement of new wooden columns would thus be a kind of continuation of the local tradition of replacing degraded columns with new ones whenever necessary (Figure 11).



Figure 10. Restoration works in: a) Our Lady of Assumption Church in Parappankandal, Mannar, with new concrete columns; b) St Anne's Church in Keerimalai, Jaffna, with an asbestos sheet roof covering, cement plaster on the walls and new mosaic floor (photos: Joaquim Rodrigues dos Santos).



Figure 11. Restoration works on a historic monastic building, famous for its wooden architecture, in the 'Mahavihara' Buddhist Monastery in Kandy (photo: Jayatissa Herath).

Work was recently done on the Keerimalai church, demonstrating the community's willingness to maintain and continue to use its old church. However, once again, this work was done voluntarily by the community, without the proper insights of specialists in heritage conservation: a new modern floor was installed and the walls were plastered with Portland cement (Figure 10b). We now know that the use of Portland cement plaster is detrimental to old buildings as it degrades the original construction materials (stone, rammed earth, adobe, etc.). More than for authenticity reasons, the removal of this Portland cement plaster and its replacement with lime plaster or similar is required for the protection of these original materials.

But how can one communicate to that modest Catholic community that the resources they managed to spend to preserve their church were useless, and this Portland cement plaster should be removed so shortly after it was applied? Or, in the case of the Parappankandal church, how can one tell the local community that the reinforced concrete columns should be removed and replaced by wooden columns, after the enormous financial effort it had to make to erect those concrete columns? And the same happened regarding the new side verandas added recently to this church.

Another issue concerns the altarpieces that used to adorn the chancels of Oratorian churches. With the exception of the churches of Kanthankulam and Kilali, which retained their original altarpieces (although in the former, the altarpiece was removed recently to include it in the new church built nearby), in the remaining churches considered for the UNESCO candidature, their altarpieces disappeared. In fact, there are few altarpieces remaining from the Oratorian period for various reasons (degradation of wood due to the tropical climate, change in the aesthetic taste of the missionary orders that replaced the Oratorians, etc.). But if these Oratorian churches had altarpieces, does their absence not constitute a gap that must be filled? And is it possible to fill this gap without compromising the inherent authenticity?



Figure 12. Wooden carved retablo at the old St Joseph's Church in Kanthankulam, Mannar: a) in 2018; b) at the new church in 2023 (photos: Sagara Jayasinghe and Joaquim Rodrigues dos Santos).

Our Lady of Victory Church in Pesalai (Mannar) has the best example of an Oratorian altarpiece in Sri Lanka [33]. The original Oratorian church where the altarpiece was located was demolished about two decades ago, and a new church was built, with the altarpiece placed in its chancel (Figure 12). The proposition arose of transferring this altarpiece to the Parappankandal church, which had been the Oratorian headquarters in Sri Lanka, thus filling the existing gap in this church and enhancing its value. In fact, the altarpiece would be better contextualised in a chancel of an old Oratorian church; however, authenticity would always be relative since the altarpiece was commissioned for another church (Pesalai), not for that specific one in Parappankandal.

With good reason, the population of Pesalai would also refuse to let the altarpiece leave its church, even if a perfect replica could be put in its place in the church. They would then wonder, again with good reason, why the perfect replica could not be placed in the Parappankandal church instead. It would be a viable option but also present a dilemma about authenticity. Leaving the church without an altarpiece compromises its authenticity since it remains an important gap in a space that was created to have an altarpiece; taking an old altarpiece from another church also undermines its authenticity, since it would be taking something that was built specifically for another church and not for that one; placing a replica of something old that was not built to be there also does not seem peaceful; and, finally, placing a new altarpiece is also questionable, especially since the art of building altarpieces was lost in Sri Lanka more than one and a half centuries ago.

Similar dilemmas also relate to the Olaihuduvai church, the oldest Oratorian church still in existence. Like most other churches, it no longer has an altarpiece in its chancel; however, an altarpiece is known to exist in a private collection that was acquired in the Mannar region (although it is not known in which church it was located previously). The proposition arises that this altarpiece could be acquired to be placed in the Olaihuduvai church or, at least, a replica

could be made for that church. But this would lead to the same authenticity issues mentioned above, which must be carefully considered.

Sustainability and integrity

Issues of sustainability and integrity are fundamental to the UNESCO classification process [26]. Sustainable management plans for heritage sites to be classified, including future uses, conservation and societal involvement to benefit and empower the community in safeguarding this heritage, are essential to ensure its preservation for future generations. In the case of the Oratorian churches under consideration, only two of them still maintain their religious function, while the other three are currently abandoned due to constructions of new churches nearby. These churches might have faced demolition some years ago, but efforts were made to prevent their destruction. Yet their clear abandonment leaves them completely vulnerable and in an accelerated process of degradation – local communities do not have enough economic resources to maintain them (Figure 13).

Culturally, these communities take pride in their new churches, symbols of modernity and community enhancement, while disregarding what is old and outdated. While this attitude is understood as intrinsic to their culture and should be respected, it does not necessarily mean agreeing or being complicit. It is also burdensome to demand that these humble communities, after the enormous effort they have expended to build their new churches, must also restore and maintain their old churches, which are already devoid of use, representing a very onerous burden. What, then, do these communities stand to gain from maintaining their old churches?

There are several arguments. If identity preservation issues for future generations assume particular relevance in an increasingly globalised, accelerated and homogenised world, it is because there is often a genuine interest in understanding the past and offering the local community a space for memory. Moreover, there is a healthy amount of pragmatism regarding heritage of local importance if it can attract visitors and generate income for the community. The possibility of the Oratorian churches receiving a UNESCO classification may generate feelings of pride in the respective communities, bringing them international recognition and potentially turning them into tourist attractions that could boost the local economies, particularly through hospitality, catering and other tourism-related services.



Figure 13. St Bartholomew's Church in Olaithoduvai, Mannar, and the construction of the new church (photo: Sagara Jayasinghe).



Figure 14. St Anne's Church in Keerimalai, Jaffna (photo: Joaquim Rodrigues dos Santos).

The integration of these churches into future cultural and religious routes is viewed positively by the Catholic Church hierarchy and community leaders, who allow for the possibility of the currently unused churches being used for special religious practices or, at the very least, becoming cultural interpretative centres focused on Oratorian heritage. The UNESCO classification itself could attract financial resources from the government or even from international institutions, thus contributing to the safeguarding of this unique heritage.

Finally, it is worth noting that climate change itself is a very delicate issue. Most of these Oratorian churches intended for classification are located in areas prone to suffering the impacts of rising sea levels or floods caused by torrential rains. Near the Keerimalai church, work has already been carried out to mitigate coastal erosion caused by rising sea levels and increasingly strong storms (Figure 14). However, such efforts seem insufficient in the face of the ferocity of the sea.

Final notes

Sixty years have passed since the enactment of the Venice Charter (1964) – much longer than the 33 years between it and the Athens Charter for Heritage (1931). The timeliness of many of its heritage principles has not prevented them from being constantly updated, through the drafting of new heritage charters, conventions and declarations that are more generic, such as the Krakow Charter, or more specific to new challenges that have arisen in the meantime, such as the documents from San Antonio (different notions of authenticity, 1966), Burra (places of cultural significance, 1981), Nara (authenticity of cultural heritage, 1994), or La Valetta (historic urban ensembles, 2011), among many others [34]. This updating continues in light of the new dilemmas, challenges and problems that arise with every turn of the page in our history: new types of heritage, technological developments, climate change, artificial intelligence, etc.

At the same time, we have come a long way since the term “colonial heritage” fell out of favour and was renamed “shared built heritage”, encompassing other types of heritage generated by the meeting of cultures other than those of colonial rule. The idealistic concept of a heritage shared not only by the cultures that originated it but also by the world itself is indeed

visionary and generous. However, it is also associated with possession, which in post-colonial contexts still marked by the memory of suffering from that past of subjugation, or especially where there are still contested (religious, ethnic) minorities, is still a problematic name. Indeed, “this heritage is ours; it belongs to no one else” is still a motto often heard in contested contexts. That is why the term “transcultural heritage” is more neutral and therefore more easily accepted.

In fact, safeguarding heritage associated with contested minorities is an issue that has yet to be openly discussed, including within ICOMOS itself. This is indeed a very sensitive issue, and one can understand why it is considered almost a “non-issue”. Nonetheless, this does not mean it should not increasingly be a subject of debate. Recognising these minorities’ identities is vital for (re)framing their dynamic narratives and cultural heritage (re)construction. This identity is constantly negotiated and the cultural heritage is often used to assert claims of legitimacy and ownership as different groups lay claim to the same objects or places and different interpretations of the past compete for dominance [35-38].

In this sense, transcultural heritage serves complex and fluid roles within a society, and notions of mutual appropriation and exchange within intercultural contacts still need to be better understood as they are crucial for developing a deeper understanding of how this heritage can be portrayed, interpreted and negotiated. Prior research has exhibited a Eurocentric tendency in examining the heritage of several minorities around the world, overlooking or downplaying the significance of local traditions and cultural practices which are central to their identities. Prioritising European models risks perpetuating colonial legacies and erasing the diversity and complexity of local cultures, nurturing misleadingly biased opinions and fortifying post-colonial hegemonic discourses.

Even the Eurocentric principles of safeguarding heritage have been revised and recontextualised for the various local realities. The debate between such contrasting principles, in which Bardeschi [39] and Marconi [40], or even Moreno-Navarro [41] have engaged, shows that even within so-called Western culture, there is no consensus on ways of acting on heritage – and perhaps there need not be. The reality shows us that heritage values associated with different cultures around the world sometimes contradict or conflict with each other [42]. This does not mean that they are right or wrong – which is precisely what requires an exercise in (re)contextualising heritage principles, including those enunciated in the Venice Charter. The key term in a heritage intervention should therefore be “ethics”: there are several good solutions to the same heritage problem, which ultimately have to be adopted by the respective communities, who will either allow that heritage to endure or fade away. Whichever solutions are adopted, what is essential is that they must be ethical interventions that do not mislead current and future generations.

The work towards submitting the Sri Lankan Oratorian churches built by Goan priests for inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List will engage two fields of study: offering a new understanding of Sri Lankan Catholic minorities’ identities, vital for reframing their dynamic narratives and cultural heritage reconstruction; and fostering a transformative dialogue with stakeholders and empowering the local communities to protect their heritage, thus enhancing its resilience – in fact, by constituting the core community, perhaps the emphasis on these minorities and their choices in terms of conservation decisions may take priority over the opinions and solutions coming from outside experts. Creative practices will methodologically allow for the re-analysis of concepts, review of existing literature (mostly Eurocentric or often misinterpreted), questioning of established paradigms (e.g. identity, authenticity, integrity, cultural accommodation) and the broader debate on the safeguarding of this transcultural heritage, particularly by (re)contextualising the principles of various existing heritage charters, such as those in the Venice Charter.

Promoting a wide debate and raising awareness about the preservation and sustainable management of this transcultural heritage, involving communities, experts, politicians and other stakeholders, constitute an essential objective. The gathered information can be used to

inform policy decisions, advocacy campaigns or public discourse on issues related to these communities, towards the development of sustainable heritage management strategies to mitigate vulnerabilities and create new spaces in which multiple narratives about the past can coexist. During these interactions with local communities, the trauma caused by the memory of colonialism or hegemonic discourses will surely be addressed, including conflicts over land, cultural and religious differences, or political marginalisation, besides post-colonial issues. In that sense, dialogue must be encouraged in the communities, following the principle of a “hospitality of narratives”: where tensions emerge, they are also given a space to linger, and as the various stakeholders tell each other their interpretations of the past, they enrich each other rather than cancel each other out.

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