

SOKARI : THE HILL COUNTRY FOLK DRAMA OF SRI LANKA

M. H. GOONATILLEKA

Folk tales gain new perspectives in the process of oral transmission over the years. Since prehistoric times, folk narratives, anecdotes, birth stories of the Buddha, stories recorded in such works as the *Pañcatantra* and the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, were subjected to this process of change and diffusion sometimes almost obliterating the original source or sources even within the country which gave birth to these stories.

Such transmissions and changes are often influenced by the close proximity of the countries concerned. This is the position with regard to India and Sri Lanka, where mutual contacts in the field of culture are obviously ancient and intimate. The subject of this paper does not cover the discussion of this broader topic of cultural borrowing. Suffice it to say that numerous stories from Indian sources have provided the basic thematic structure of a variety of Sinhala folk plays and ballads, establishing in the process local identities and varied contact situations.

The saga of *Kannaki* and *Kovalan* recorded in the Tamil epic poem *Silappadhikāram*¹ and its sequel *Maṅimēkhalai*² is one such narrative of wider import. The Kannaki saga gradually developed in content and in form through local associations in the process of its oral transmission through countries like Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka. In our island it remains as a popular theme in the ritual theatre and in the folk ballad.

The hill country folk opera *Sokari Nāṭiya* (commonly referred to as *Sokari*), the content of which is recounted in the Sinhala verse book *Sokari Kathāva* *hevat Gura Hāṭṭuaya* is strongly related to this saga. The story is dramatically presented by players who resort to mime, dance and stylized movements as a back-up for the normal prose and verse dialogue.

Sokari has been traditionally presented as a harvest drama. It is rustic no doubt but nonetheless dramatically inspiring. It is a folk play balladic and operatic in style.

1. Literally 'The story of the anklet

2. Lit. 'The girl of Mani, the daughter of Kovalan and Mādhavi. The work is attributed to Sītalacōchātṭanār.