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An Interview with Tissa Kariyawasam on Aspects of Culture in Sri Lanka

Le Roy Robinson

Tissa Kariyawasam is Associate Professor of Sinhala at Sri Jayawardenapura University, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka.

He was born on August 23, 1942, in a village called Ganegama in Baddegama in the District of Galle in the Southern Province.

He went to primary school in Pilagoda and received his secondary education at Ratnasara Vidyalaya, Baddegama.

He graduated from the University of Peradeniya in 1964 with Honors in Sinhala and with Ceylon History and Archaeology as complementary subjects.

From 1964 to 1967 he taught classical Sinhala Prose Literature and Modern Poetry at the University of Colombo. In 1967 he joined the faculty at Sri Jayawardenapura University.

In 1968 he received a Master's degree from the University of Peradeniya. His master's thesis was "Demonological Rituals and Society: A Study of Four Main Rituals in the Low Country Area." In 1973 he was awarded a Ph. D. from the University of London, England. His doctoral dissertation was "Religious Activities and the Development of a New Poetical Tradition in Sinhalese from 1852 to 1906" .

From 1981, to 1986, he was Director of the Institute of Aesthetic Studies at the University of Kelaniya, Colombo, the only state sponsored institute in Sri Lanka where Music, Dancing, Art and Sculpture are taught for the degree of Bachelor of Fine Arts.

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ROBINSON: The title of your master's thesis is interesting. How did you get interested in "Demonological Rituals and Society"?

KARIYAWASAM: I became interested in folk rituals and folk culture because of Professor Ediriweera Sarachchandra. In 1964 just after I left Peradeniya and went to the University of Colombo as an assistant lecturer, I was working in the same department with Dr. Sarachchandra. One day he said he was going down South to watch a demon ritual, and I accompanied him. At that time he was revising his book on Sinhalese folk plays. I wrote the dialogue of the ritual plays that we saw in shorthand and gave comprehensive notes to Sarachchandra. Later on I went into rituals myself.

ROBINSON: Would you say something about these rituals?

KARIYAWASAM: Most Sri Lankans are Buddhists, Sinhala Buddhists. When they face the calamities of day to day life, they forget the basic teachings of Buddhism. They propitiate a pantheon of super-natural beings, benevolent deities in various forms, and malevolent demons who roam around in society. These demons are able to make human beings sick. When these demons are given food, they make patients happy.

At a time when modern scientific knowledge was beyond their grasp, the villagers created various rituals combined with dancing, drumming, recitations, and various decorations in order to get rid of the evils and diseases.

When someone is afflicted by sorcery, a ritual called "destruction of the sorcery" is done in which they enact the origin of this ritual and give food to the Demon of Sorcery.

There is a Demon called Sanni, who will introduce diseases con-

nected with the stomach such as diarrhea, vomiting, and headache. When he and his retinue are propitiated in an all night ritual, the patient will be cured. Sanni and his eighteen lesser demons are brought to the arena. They are given food on a tray of offering. The exorcists offer cooked rice and uncooked rice, seven vegetables, fried meat, human excreta, intoxicants on this tray.

There is also a fertility ritual called the "Ritual of Seven Barren Queens". A long time ago, seven barren queens had woven a shawl and offered it at the feet of the Buddha, and they were blessed with children. Now this ritual is being performed for the safe delivery of a child.

ROBINSON: Who are these exorcists?

KARIYAWASAM: The exorcists or priests who perform these rituals are villagers. They have mastered drumming, dancing and recitation from traditional masters and they perform the whole ritual from memory. Both drummers and dancers in these rituals are known as exorcists.

ROBINSON: Please describe one of these rituals.

KARIYAWASAM: During the night time observance of these rituals, the demons are invited into the area where they are offered the trays of offering. This is a dramatic sequence. All the villagers, well-wishers and friends sit in a circular form and watch these ceremonies. Dancers address, invite and describe these demons for nearly an hour with prose and verses. By that time one of the dancers is getting ready to come to the arena in the guise of a demon. He wears a mask with black and red clothes and a sword. He has a pole in his hands as he shouts and hoots behind the altars. He enters into the midst of the audience. The young people in the audience and women are frightened by his looks. The drummers and the dancers who invite this demon into the arena

engage in a dialogue with him in which he describes his character to the audience. He is asked to show his power. In reply he points to the patient and he says he has already made the patient sick. The dancer says: What do you want to cure her? In reply the demon says: I want meat, rice, flowers, clothes, intoxicants and a rooster to have blood. The dancer says: These things are already here. Then the demon takes his tray of offerings and after blessing the patient leaves the area.

Anyway, I was fascinated by these rituals. Whenever I heard of a ritual taking place, I went there. The whole night I watched the ceremony, taking notes, and chatting with the exorcists. I did not have a tape recorder. I wrote everything down.

All these folk arts are dying out now. The traditional systems are degraded now. With the advent of television and other state-sponsored programs the standards have been forced to deteriorate. So the traditional masters are reluctant to hand over their knowledge to the young generation.

ROBINSON: Have you written anything on these ritualistic folk plays besides your thesis?

KARIYAWASAM: I have contributed more than twenty articles on them, and three books too. And wherever I was invited, I went places to do illustrative lectures on demonological ritual drama. Mind you, I'm one of the luckiest Sinhalese to be able to go to Jaffna in 1981. At the Teacher Training College in Palali where all the Tamil dancing and music teachers attended, I delivered a three hour lecture on the dancing in these ritual folk plays.

ROBINSON: Why do you say "lucky"?

KARIYAWASAM: I say lucky because due to the recent disturbances in the political field now, Sinhalese are unable to go to Jaffna — except the government party officials and the officers in the military forces.

ROBINSON: Were you yourself active in this kind of dancing?

KARIYAWASAM: Well, not as a dancer. To be a dancer is not acceptable in society, not recognized, Dancing was done by a lower community in the social hierarchy. Don't forget we have a rigid caste system here.

The dancer is not accepted as a scholar or an eminent person in our society. This applies even to Chitrasena. But his social upbringing and his middle-class Western-oriented manners make him a little different from other dancers.

But the Government Arts Council had a Low Country Dancing Panel. Galle can be called the capital of the Low Country. I was a member of that Panel from 1965 up to 1975. In 1976 I was Chairman of the Panel.

ROBINSON: What did the Low Country Dance Panel do?

KARIYAWASAM: We organized island-wide folk dancing competitions. In Colombo we held all-night ritualistic performances. These activities came to a peak in 1975 when we formed the National Dancers Ensemble. W. B. Makuloluwa, Ranjit Yayinna, and I interviewed nearly six hundred artistes to select twenty for the ensemble. Unfortunately, these artistes were paid very low wages. Now nobody knows what they are doing. And now the Ensemble is out of the country most of the time.

ROBINSON: Why is that?

KARIYAWASAM: All the invitations received by the government are extended to the Dancing Ensemble. All the cultural agreements are honored with these trips, it seems.

ROBINSON: To go back, almost everybody I've interviewed in Sri Lanka mentions the importance of Dr. Ediriweera Sarachchandra. Would you comment on that?

KARIYAWASAM: Let me put it this way: For reasons not wholly known to me, many of the elderly artistes in the field of drama, like Henry Jayasena, are no longer active. Sarachchandra is the exception. He is still writing and producing plays. His *Loma Hansa*, (Dumbfounded, in the sense of startled), which is based on a Jataka story about a king, “Maha Paduma” (Great Lotus), was produced recently.

Sarachchandra was the pioneer of the new generation in drama and theatre. I can recall how, when we were studying at Peradeniya, we watched Sarachchandra’s rehearsals of plays. He also conducted a class called “Nirmana” (Creation”) in which the young undergraduates presented their writings to him and to each other. During the class we were all allowed to criticize each work presented. Thus, Sarachchandra created not only creators but also critics. He is responsible for bringing up the writers and critics of the 1960s.

I have known Dr. Sarachchandra for the last twenty seven years. We were very close friends at one time. Now the responsibilities of family life do not allow us to meet so often.

ROBINSON: Do you yourself write much drama criticism?

KARIYAWASAM: Well, starting in 1964 I wrote critical reviews for various newspapers on the island for more than a decade. In English, for the *Observer* and *Daily News*. In Sinhala, for *Ada*, *Silumina*, *Sarasaviya*, and *Yovun Janatha*.

ROBINSON: Why did you stop?

KARIYAWASAM: Sri Lanka is a small country where everyone knows everyone else. Sarachchandra once said there are people in the country who know about him better than he knows himself. Writing criticism of plays is making enemies. Nobody wants to hear of his defects. Another point is, nobody cares for criticism. People will be annoyed or embarrassed or get angry. Nobody goes to the theatre after

reading reviews.

Anyway, after stopping writing criticism in the newspapers, in 1967, I translated two plays by Chekhov into Sinhala, *The Bear* and *The Proposal*. Both plays were staged at the Lionel Wendt Theatre in Colombo more than twenty-five times in the period of a year. A record run at that time. But now a successful play runs from 300 to 500 shows.

ROBINSON: Have you tried your hand at acting?

KARIYAWASAM: No, but in 1981 at the Sixth Asian Festival of the Arts in Hong Kong, I directed a modern version of *Sirisangabo*, a play written by John de Silva in 1903, which was selected by the Tower Hall Foundation. After taking part in the festival in Hong Kong we performed for two weeks in Beijing and Shanghai in the People's Republic of China and one week in Bangkok, Thailand.

ROBINSON: Would you say something about John de Silva briefly?

KARIYAWASAM: I think you know a little about John de Silva already. He was born in 1857 and died in 1922. He was one of the pioneers. He wrote and produced about thirty five dramas. He followed the model introduced by the Hindustan Dramatic Company from Bombay in 1886. He was a protagonist of the nativistic movement and through some of his plays he praised the national culture of the past.

ROBINSON: Have you written much about Sinhala drama besides folk drama from a scholarly point of view?

KARIYAWASAM: I've written one volume of a *History of Sinhala Drama from 1867 to 1911*. This book ran into two editions. after that I published a book called *University Drama from 1921 to 1981*. It also ran into two editions.

But, mind you, publishers in Sri Lanka were reluctant to publish those kinds of books. That was the mentality prevailing.

Now my *Twenty Years of Sinhala Drama and Theatre* 1912–1931 has just come out. Thanks to the newly formed Library Services Board. And I am preparing another part of this book to be published next year, *Twenty–five Years of Sinhala Drama and Theatre* 1932–1956.

Incidentally, we did not have any historical documents on the history of Sinhala drama. I reconstructed it by going through newspapers and other journals published during that time.

ROBINSON: I suppose your *University Drama* means local university drama.

KARIYAWASAM: Yes. Sri Lankan universities. Up to 1959 we had only one university. In 1921 it was the University College where a Sinhala Society was established to inspire the undergraduates. From 1933 the English Drama Society under the late Professor Lyn Ludowyck produced more than twenty plays up to 1959; he prepared most of the English scripts. The Sinhala Society, too, at the beginning, did some adaptations from Moliere, Gogol, Chekhov. Later Sarachchandra took over the Sinhala drama society and produced more than 20 original plays up to 1972. When Vidyodaya and Vidyalankara, two traditional institutes of Buddhist education, were elevated to university level in 1959, the forerunners of Sri Jayawardenapura and Kelaniya universities, they too did about ten plays. The Department of Tamil at the University of Peradeniya also produced plays in Tamil. My book is about all this.

ROBINSON: What is the Library Services Board?

KARIYAWASAM: The Library Services Board comes under the Minister of Educational Services, Lionel Jayatilaka. It has a panel, of readers who will read a writer's manuscript and will contribute up to 25,000 rupees (about \$1,000) to help pay the printing bill. In the last two years they have helped at least two hundred writers in this way.

Since the Library Services Board contributed 25,000 rupees for each of the two books on Sinhala Drama between 1912 and 1956, I was able to pay the printing bill using only a little money from my own pocket.

ROBINSON: Have you written any original dramas of your own?

KARIYAWASAM: No, but I've written novels. I published my first novel in 1969, *Perum Puranne Bosat Medina* (The Aspirant Buddha Is Fulfilling Perfections). Then in 1975 I published *Honda Minihek Veyan* (Be You a Good Man).

I've been pressed with administrative work for the last six years and it's kept me away from creative writing. But I have two other novels finished. One is *Duka Hitana Epa* (Don't Feel Sorrow). My newest is *Apita Yanna Tanak Naha* (No Place for Us to Go).

ROBINSON: What are these novels about?

KARIYAWASAM: In *Perum Puranne Bosat Medina* the narrator, Sumedha, is the son of a small shop owner in a village who stresses his son's education in English. While Sumedha is in the English school, he falls in love with a young woman named Sandalatha. His dreams about her are shattered by an intruder named Jayasiri, a teacher. When Sandalatha becomes pregnant, Jayasiri deserts her. The kind-hearted young lover, Sumedha, comes to her rescue, assuming to himself the role of Aspiring one. *Bosat* is "future Buddha."

Honda Minihek Veyan is the story of Jayasena and his younger brother who live in the cooly-lines in a tea estate in the Southern Province. Jayasena labors hard for the sake of his brother's studies. Due to various political and social causes, the brother is only able to become a Sinhala teacher. The trade union activities that Jayasena engages in become futile. His love affair with Arundathie, a young Tamil woman, comes to an end with the breaking out of the anti-Tamil struggles in the 1950s. The brother brought up by Jayasena

neglects all the traditional ethical values and marries without even informing Jayasena. The novel ends with Jayasena's saying his intention was not to make a big man out of his brother but a good man.

In *Duka Hitana Epa* a middleclass graduate teacher who is living alone falls in love with the narrator, who is soon to leave for Canada on a fellowship. The woman agrees to go with him, but at the last minute she gives up the idea. The novel tries to show the causes for the destruction of family life in the midst of all the modern economic policies.

Apita Yanna Tanak Naha deals with the changing village in the face of new development schemes in Sri Lanka. Nature always embraces the life of the villagers. The river Gin and the people around were living happily. The people felt no animosity towards the river even when it flooded over. But the government started a new development project, erecting bunds and anicuts. These new schemes of development come into effect, and the life of the villagers becomes artificial and the social integrity of village life comes to an end.

ROBINSON: Before we go ahead, could we go back? Were your parents very influential in your choice of career?

KARIYAWASAM: Even before I started school, I began my studies at the feet of my father. He taught me how to read and how to write at home. He prepared a blackboard for me. He bought chalk. Whenever he was free during the day, he taught me.

We were living near a tea estate, and in the evening a Tamil teacher, really a *Kangani*, a supervisor of plantation workers, came in and taught me Tamil and English as well. I started with *Balabodhini*, a Tamil reader, and New Method English Readers.

I can still read and write Tamil. But, unfortunately, the friendly atmosphere between Sinhalese and Tamils is changing for the worst.

Of course, I have Tamil friends. To name a few, K. S. Shivakumaran, a writer who has introduced some Tamil works to English readers; Dr. K. Kandiah, a lecturer at the Open University of Sri Lanka; Professor K. Sivathambi, who teaches Tamil at the University of Jaffna; Mrs. Shyamala Punyamoorthis, a teacher at St. Bridget Convent in Colombo...

ROBINSON: When did you start your formal schooling?

KARIYAWASAM: It was common practice in the 1940s for a child to enter kindergarten at the age of five. I was admitted to kindergarten in Ganegama, but at the end of the year I was given a double promotion; that is to say, I skipped first grade and was enrolled as a primary school pupil in second grade.

Then when I was nine years old, in 1951, my grandmother, my father's mother, took me to Pilagoda, where she lived. She said English was taught better in the primary school there. Then from Pilagoda I was taken to Ratnasara Vidyalaya, at that time the only Buddhist English school in Baddegama. Ratnasara was the name of the founder.

What I want to point out to you is the ideas that prevailed in society then, the tendency toward English studies.

ROBINSON: What kind of a place was Baddegama?

KARIYAWASAM: It's said that during the 15th century the villagers of Baddegama provided alms of rice to the Buddhist priests at the educational institute of Totagamuva. It's mainly an agricultural area. Baddegama was one of the first towns affected by the Christian religious activities in the island. So within a radius of twelve miles there were three well-known Christian schools there. Ratnasara was the only Buddhist school.

The manager of Ratnasara was D. E. Hettiarachchi He was a

tea estate owner too. Although the instruction was in English, he and a Buddhist priest, the Reverend Ganegama Saranankara, guided the school with a Sinhala Buddhist flavor.

ROBINSON: What kind of instruction did you get in English?

KARIYAWASAM: We had over ten hours a week of classwork in English. We learned elocution. We had English literary clubs. We debated in English. There was a school magazine published in English.

ROBINSON: I thought that about that time the Sinhala Only Law of 1956 had gone into effect.

KARIYAWASAM: Sinhala only was implemented in 1957. By that time, the Free Education Bill was passed in the Parliament. Yes, the medium of instruction in the public schools was changing. Sinhala, the language of the majority of Sri Lankans, the language of the common man, was replacing English in administration and education.

But the schools whose instruction had been in English kept some of the characteristics of their schools, like those at Ratnasara that I've described. These schools wanted to draw the attention of parents who wanted their children to learn English as well as Sinhala.

Our parents, including my grandmother, other villagers, were ignorant of the social happenings of that time -- no mass media as such -- they were not in a position to understand what was happening politically in our country, but one thing they saw was that we children had to be acquainted with English as well as Sinhala.

If parents had wanted their children to learn only Sinhala, they could easily have sent their children to a nearby Sinhala public school without paying school fees and without spending money for school uniforms.

ROBINSON: How much were school fees in those days?

KARIYAWASAM: Oh, from two to five rupees monthly.

ROBINSON: Just out of curiosity, what kind of uniform did you have to wear at Ratnasara?

KARIYAWASAM: Blue-colored trousers, a white short-sleeved shirt, and shoes.

ROBINSON: Shoes?

KARIYAWASAM: At the Sinhala public schools shoes were not necessary. You could wear the common man's clothing.

ROBINSON: As far as I understand, the whole education system was in turmoil in the 1950s.

KARIYAWASAM: Yes. Even the Minister who introduced free public school education, Dr. C. W. W. Kannangara -- he was Minister of Education from 1931 to 1947 -- was criticized and humiliated so much that he died poor, neglected by all. When free education was introduced poor boys could go through higher studies, thus paving the way for them to go up the social ladder. The free education system was a blow to the affluent classes. Dr. Kannangara was defeated in the elections. He had no permanent income and had to live hand to mouth.

English education had been limited to the rich middle class people of the country. Their sons and daughters were sent to private schools in Colombo, and they were the few who had the white-collar jobs in the country. At that time most parents thought that their daughters did not need higher education.

After 1956, the Sinhala-educated class was given a chance. Some of them did not know English. In the Parliament they talked only in Sinhala. In English schools, the students who were doing their Senior School Certificate in English -- that's the equivalent of today's General Certificate of Educations, Ordinary Level -- they

had to take the same examinations the following year in Sinhala. Thus, a bilingual educated class came up. All the teachers who had done their teaching in English tried their best to teach the same subjects in Sinhala.

You seem to be wondering why all these language troubles started in my country. But do not forget that when any big change occurs a country's politicians are often there to take advantage of the situation. A gang of fanatics arose throughout the political field. Most politicians are not scholars. They did not know what Prime Minister S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike wanted. They were all for Sinhala Only and against all that is English. Under their influence, the majority of the common people thought they should give up studying English.

ROBINSON: You seem to be saying that Bandaranaike himself was more reasonable in his thinking about language studies in Sri Lanka than his political followers.

KARIYAWASAM: Bandaranaike was the receiving end of all the follies created by those politicians. His own close colleagues did not want this language issue to be so powerful.

ROBINSON: What happened after Bandaranaike's assassination by a Buddhist monk? When his wife became Prime Minister what did she do in the field of education? By the way was the reason for the assassination related to Sinhala Only?

KARIYAWASAM: Not only Sinhala Only. I think changing social values got together. Bandaranaike and his colleagues were considered socialists, in a limited context. But those who helped him to become Prime Minister were advocating capitalism.

As for his murderers, one of the accused, the head priest of the Kelaniya Temple, was in the shipping business. He had formed a shipping company, and he and others had led protests against one of Ban-

daranaike's most progressive laws, the Paddy Lands Act. One of the others accused was an ayurvedic eye physician, who had been appointed by Bandaranaike as a lecturer at the Indigenous Medical College. They were both Sinhala – speaking.

As for Mrs. Bandaranaike, one of the first things she did was to create a second faculty of arts at the University of Colombo. Starting on January 1, 1964, all the official duties were to be performed in Sinhala. At Vidyodaya and Vidyolankara, two new science faculties were established whose work was also to be done in Sinhala. Therefore, Sinhala education has created the new elite, administrative officers teachers. At least forty per cent of the lecturers in universities are Sinhala – educated.

ROBINSON: I've been told that the implementation of Sinhala Only was done inadequately.

KARIYAWASAM: Unfortunately, the Bandaranaike governments had to work with officials who had a colonial mentality. Nevertheless, those who have done their education in Sinhala became teachers, scientists, accountants, engineers, artistes. Before that, these positions were limited to the few who did their education in English and who could only speak English. Ignorance of the mother tongue used to be an asset then. Now I think there are government offices where you can not find anyone who can speak English, but they can do their work well with only Sinhala.

But, yes, there were problems. One of the first things Mrs. Bandaranaike did was to establish a Department of Official Languages. This department prepared glossaries. The difficult words and technical terms of any subject were collected and all the Sinhala equivalents were given. These glossaries were needed for a transitional period. Those who had studied in English now needed to teach

in Sinhala. They needed those glossaries. But the glossaries stayed on their shelves. They did not reach the new intelligentsia.

ROBINSON: What was the effect of the language change on the people in the Sinhala theatre here?

KARIYAWASAM: I have been working with this new generation of Sinhala – educated youths for nearly two decades. They were the elite of the country. They were the producers of the Sinhala plays of the sixties. I myself served as a member of the Drama Panel of the Arts Council from 1964 to 1970 continuously. Ninety per cent of the actors and actresses were only Sinhala – educated.

As for the plays themselves, in the sixties Dr. Sarachchandra did *Sinhabahu* (The Origin of the Sinhala Race). *Sinhabahu* was the grandfather of Vijaya, the legendary founder of the Sinhala people. The play depicts the ambitious nature of the younger generation against their elders.

Sugathapala de Silva resurrected the dialogue play and translated Pirandello, Brecht, and Tennessee Williams. Henry Jayasena used traditional forms to describe the modern city life calamities of middle class office workers in *Janelaya* (The Window). Dayananda Gunawardene translated *The Marriage of Figaro*. Bandula Jayawardene did a Jataka tale called *Swarna Hansa* (Golden Swan) in which a wife kills a golden swan to get its feathers of gold. He also translated a play by Sophocles. Chandrasna Pasanayaka used the folk theatre to discuss the international political scene in *Seven Gypsies in a Shelter*. The gypsies can't unite and live together. The play ridicules the attitudes of big nations in the West trying to come to an agreement under the umbrella of the United Nations. Premaranjit Tilikaratna started with an original play, *A House without a Roof*, which shows the calamities faced by a village family when the husband is lost.

Dhama Jagoda adapted *A Stretcar Named Desire*. Ranjit Dharmakirithi translated Harold Pinter and Alexander Arbuzov. R. R. Samarakoon did originals dealing with slum life, the changing society. One of his plays, *Idama*, (The Land), depicts the distribution of land among landless people during Mrs. Bandaranaike's regime. Another, *Kelani Palama* (Kelani Bridge), shows the problems facing the people in the low lying areas around Kelani Bridge who stay on the bridge when there is a flood.