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

Le Roy Robinson
Tissa Kariyawasam is Chairman of the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation National Television Center.

He is also Professor of Sinhala at Sri Jayawardenepura University, Nugegoda.

He was formerly Director of the Institute of Aesthetic Studies at the University of Kelaniya.

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.

In 1964 Kariyawasam graduated from the University of Peradeniya 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 1968 he received a Master’s degree from the University of Peradeniya. His thesis was “Demonological Rituals and Society.” In 1973 he was awarded a Ph. D. from the University of London, England. His dissertation was “Religious Activities and the Development of a New Poetical Tradition in Sinhalese from 1852 to 1906”.

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ROBINSON: Now, let’s concentrate on the 19th century ola or palm leaf manuscripts that you went to England to examine in the British
Museum Library. Would you explain what they are?

KARIYAWASAM: You say 19th century, and that is correct.

But don’t forget that the Sinhalese had a written alphabet as early as the second century B.C., and there are inscriptions still around written in that script. When I say “inscription”, I mean writing on a stone. There were books too. The oldest available book belongs to the 12th century. Books were written by Buddhist priests — and later by lay scribes — on the ola leaf. This system of writing on ola was continued up to the end of the 19th century. And we must not forget one more thing here. Even now the horoscope of a person and the amulets for children when they are sick are drawn on these leaves.

ROBINSON: How is this done?

KARIYAWASAM: To write on the ola leaf the scribe, the writer, needs a tool called panhinda or stylus. The traditional one is 20 inches long. The art is of making a book with leaves strung together by means of a cord. These leaves are placed between the carefully designed wooden or silver covers called kamba. This art has been known in Sri Lanka from time immemorial. In other words, writing on ola has been in vogue here for more than 22 centuries.

ROBINSON: Can you describe the way these leaves are produced, or should I say prepared?

KARIYAWASAM: Production of palm leaf for writing is a tedious process. To answer your question, let me quote directly from C. M. Austin Silva. He was an anthropologist and folklorist who used to be the Librarian of the Colombo National Museum. “This writing material, prepared from the tender leaf of the Talipot palm, is obtained from its unopened leaf bud, about 10 to 20 feet in length, and which consists of about 80 to 100 leaflets. The midrib of each leaflet
is removed and the blades are rolled up. These rolls known as “vattu” are put into a large vessel of water and boiled for a couple of hours over a slow fire. The rolls are then taken out and left in the open for three consecutive days. The next process is to to smoothen and polish the leaf blades by repeatedly running them over the smooth surface of a wooden cylinder for which locally a mol gaha or a pestle is utilized. During the process of smoothening each leaf blade is weighted at one end. When the process of smoothening is completed the leaves are cut into the conventional sizes, with length varying from 6 inches to 32 inches, and width from 2 inches to 2 3/4 inches. The punch holes on each leaf are executed with a heated iron rod, and these are required for passing the pot lanuva or core for holding together leaves of a palm leaf manuscript. The next step in the process of preparation is to press together tightly the punched leaves, and their sides and ends are singed with a hot iron so as to make all the leaves uniform in size. All the leaves in a volume are assembled between the two wooden or metal covers, and a strong cord is passed through the punch holes to hold the leaves and covers together, and the manuscript is securely tied up with the same cord.”

If you’re interested, there’s a similar description of this process in T. G. Piyadasa’s Libraries in Sri Lanka, which you said you know.

ROBINSON: Then, what are the contents of these ola leaf manuscripts you have examined in the British Museum Library? And how many are there?

KARIYAWASAM: There are about 2777 in all. Out of the 932 verse manuscripts, for example, about 500 deal with the traditional rituals in which the various deities are praised and the demons propitiated. Some manuscripts describe various rituals which are unknown today.

ROBINSON: Would you give us one example?
KARIYAWASAM: One is the Kota Halu Mangallaya — the ceremony connected with a girl’s attainment of puberty. A few of the manuscripts deal with the performance of this ritual. The titles differ. Kotahalu Upata is the origin of puberty. Loka Utpattiya is origin of the world. Kotahalu Magul Kavi is verses on the puberty ritual. Why this ritual is called Kota Halu or Kota Salu is not known. According to some interpretations, when Queen Maha Sammata, the wife of the first ruler on earth, attained age — that is, she began to menstruate — she was wearing a short frock. Hence the name. Kota Halu means short frock.

ROBINSON: Are any of the rituals described in these manuscripts still performed in Sri Lanka?

KARIYAWASAM: The details of the ritual described in these texts I just mentioned — and in Amarasanthiya, a celestial ritual and Laka Raja Upata about the origin of the king of Sri Lanka ······ the details are not found now. Amazingly, the ritual is so modernized, not only in the cities but also in the villages. It’s now like a wedding hall, with lights everywhere, loud music from lound speakers, and various entertainments. But in the olden days when a girl attained the age of puberty she informed her mother or an older woman. She was placed in a hut specially made for her. This hut was known as Kola Maduwa or the bower. The mother would go to an astrologer. He would prepare a malvara handahana, the horoscope for the ritual of puberty. You see, she is considered an unclean person, and she has to spend time in this hut without partaking of any oily foods or hot foods. Oily foods are thought to be connected with pollution and demons. On the auspicious day, the washerwoman will come to her hut and will bathe her. She — the washerwoman — will be the owner of all the clothes she was wearing at the time, including her necklaces and
other golden ornaments. After the bath she is taken into her house with a lighted lamp in her right hand. She'll be given presents by her relatives. Some of the customs are changed now. Unfortunately.

As for your question, though, I must say that I recently came across a group in the Anuradhapura District who still occasionally perform one certain ritual described by Hugh Nevill. I was organizing the Cultural Festival of the village communities. At Anuradhapura I met P. Kuda Henaya, K. Vela, and K. V. Appuva. They are the exorcists during this ritual. These terms Henaya and Vela can only be used for the people of the washermen's caste. All of them are from Hiriyalegama and Nochchiyagama, villages near Anuradhapura. This highly ritualistic ceremony is sometimes known as Ran Sali Magula or the ritual of the golden bowl.

A heap of paddy is collected at a bower. On the paddy a plank is kept — it's known as poruva — and the girl stands on this plank. She is blessed the whole night by the priests, who are of the washerman's caste. Verses are sung in praise of the son of a washerwoman called Nila, who is sometimes propitiated in the Kohomba Kankariya ritual as an attendant of Kalu Kumnaraya. As for Nila, his life is connected with all the puberty rituals and in the origin story of Kalu Kumaraya or the Black Prince in the Kandyan areas. After his death, he was venerated as a demi — god. Kalu Kumaya is mentioned in the Mahavamsa as the general who accompanies King Gajaba when he invaded India in order to take revenge upon the king of Chola for taking 12,000 Sinhalese villagers as prisoners. King Gajaba reigned in the first century A. D. His invasion is mentioned in the Mahavamsa, the Great Chronicle, and in the classical Tamil poem, "The Golden Anklet". The Ran Sali Magula is one instance when the priests of the Radava, the washerman's caste, are given the high
status of a priest at a ritual. As I said, the bower is known as Kola Maduwa, and this ritual is sometimes called Kola Maduve Mangalaya, the ritual of the bower.

ROBINSON: Did Hugh Nevill collect these works on the propitiation of deities and demons from all regions of Ceylon at the time?

KARIYAWASAM: Most of the works he collected came from the North Central Province and Central Province. He was residing then at Matara and Balapitiya, but it seems that he was unable to collect versions from those areas. It may be that he was not interested in this field at the early period of his career.

ROBINSON: Did Nevill also collect ola about history? If we can disassociate ritual and history.

KARIYAWASAM: In some manuscripts, historical works are related. Such as Vijayindu Hatare, the story of Vijaya. In these manuscripts, there are details of royal dynasties not to be found in the Mahavamsa, the Great Chronicle, or in any other known historical documents. Commenting on Sulu Rajavaliya and some related documents, Nevill says that, apart from the Great Chronicle, there are various other documents which supply us with the ancient history of Sri Lanka. For example, in his Taprobanian he has translated one such book called Raja Vickrema Pravritti. This is a historical document, but it cannot be the work of a scholar. It does contain some material which does not appear in any other historical document. Hugh Nevill received it from a villager as a history book that had been in his family for a long series of generations, and which neither he nor his grandfather could read or make out. This has 37 leaves. It’s a history of kings in Ceylon down to the reign of Parakramabahu at the close of the 13th century.

ROBINSON: How does Nevill stand in relation to other students of ancient
Sri Lankan culture?

KARIYAWASAM: Nevill interpreted some inscriptions and criticized the views expressed by other scholars. For example, the inscriptions in the special characters of the Brahmin alphabet. This can be found in India, too. Therefore, this script is sometimes known as Asoka script. It's believed that it was brought into this country with Buddhism during the time of Asoka in India. As for scholarship, the inscription at Mihintale was written during the time of Mahinda IV. Later a glossary on this inscription was written under the title Mihintale Sannas Liyavilla. The inscription deals with the administrative rules of a Buddhist monastery in the 10th century A.D. Mihintale is the place where the first Buddhist missionaries arrived. Hugh Nevill said that Edward Muller, who wrote *The Ancient Inscriptions of Ceylon* in 1883, misunderstood and misinterpreted one of the terms in the document. The queen mentioned in the document was Dev Got. Muller read the name as Dev Gon, which he interpreted as Queen Gon. Now in Sinhala *gon* is bull. Nevill says the name is not Gon but Got, meaning the Gupta Queen. By the way, I've been concentrating on Sinhala, but Nevill also translated some Tamil inscriptions. Nevill also discussed in detail some of the primitive groups in Ceylon. The tribe of Veddahs, for example. The tribe of Rodiyas or Godi, for another. He discussed their rituals, their ways of life, their languages. Actually, Hugh Nevill wrote on the Veddahs about a quarter of a century before the publication of Dr. Charles Gabriel Seligman's *The Veddahs* on this primitive tribe.

ROBINSON: Did Nevill collect antiques other than ola manuscripts?

KARIYAWASAM: As far as collections go, he was a zoologist too. He collected animal skins. He explored the possibility of presenting some of the animal skins to various institutions in England. He spent his per-
sonal money for this purpose. In one of his reports he mentions that in 1895 he expressed his willingness to present about 1500 skins of various animals to the South Kensington National Museum. He bought the skins and collected them and preserved them by putting them in medicated spirits. He sent them to the Colombo Museum to have them packed properly in jars. Unfortunately, the packers at the museum did such a horrible a job that when they reached London all the jars were broken except one. But Nevill wasn't discouraged. He made another collection of skins of Ceylon birds and another of Ceylon shells. Now preserved at the British Museum.

Nevill lived only 49 years, but his writings, his collections of manuscripts and his collections of animal skins were a great asset for the development of Sinhala literature.

ROBINSON: Let's go into Hugh Nevill himself in more detail. But first, would you please explain Nevill's being an asset to Sinhala literature?

KARIYAWASAM: Well, before Hugh Nevill did it, only a very few people put their attention to the study of Sinhalese literature. In 1852 James De Alwis, a member of the legislative council and an Oriental scholar — there is material about him in the writings of one of his relatives, Yasmin Dias Bandaranaike — translated Sidat Sangarava, a 13th century grammar of the Sinhala language. In his introduction, De Alwis dealt with important books in Sinhala. Louis De Zoysa, an administrator, compiled two catalogues — one in 1870 on the Oriental Library, and in 1876 one on the books in temples. He was the first Mudliyar to the Governor and he went through the ola leaf manuscripts lying at temples in southern Sri Lanka.

ROBINSON: You say Hugh Nevill died when he was 49 years old. In the 19th century. Who was Hugh Nevill — that is, what was his purpose in coming to Ceylon?
KARIYAWASAM: He was a British civil servant. He served in Ceylon for nearly 30 years. He was born in June 1848; the exact place in England isn’t known. He arrived in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) late in 1865. He served as private secretary to the Chief Justice and was then appointed secretary to the Prison Commission. After that, he often served as an Acting District Judge — of Matara, for example, for about two months — or as an Acting Police Magistrate — of Balapiti Modera, for example — or as an Acting Commissioner of Requests in Colombo. Sitting for civil service examinations, he rose to Class Two in the Ceylon Civil Service.

ROBINSON: Where was he living in Ceylon when he died?

KARIYAWASAM: Oh, he died in France, at Hyere, in October 1897. When he left the island, and why, I don’t know. His collection of manuscripts — about 2777 ola leaf manuscripts, as I said — was with him at his death, it seems, and his hand-written catalogue on these manuscripts.

ROBINSON: How did they get to the British Museum?

KARIYAWASAM: When he died, the French government took charge of the manuscripts. The British Museum secured them in 1904. They’re carefully preserved at the Oriental Reading Room. Under the supervision of Dr. Albertine Gaur, the Chief Recorder.

ROBINSON: What kind of a person was Hugh Nevill?

KARIYAWASAM: Regrettably, apart from the Ceylon Civil Lists, we have little other information concerning his personal life. Of course, the British Museum has tried to get more information.

As far as Nevill’s scholarship is concerned, the British Museum Library has published five volumes based on his hand-written catalogue. There are two more to come. K. D. Somadasa, who used to be Librarian at the University of Peradeniya, is the compiler. The
title is *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Hugh Nevill Collection at the British Museum Library.*

ROBINSON: You said Nevill translated not only Sinhala inscriptions but also Tamil ones. He must have been something of a linguist.

KARIYAWASAM: Yes, he also knew Pali and Sanskrit, and some Malayalam. He spent most of his time here in the Tamil areas. His service in the Sinhala areas was limited to about six years.

ROBINSON: Was it difficult for him to get the books he needed?

KARIYAWASAM: He was a highly respected administrative officer, so he was able to get the books he needed in manuscript from the administrators of the villages and from the monks of village temples. The British government requested all its administrative officers to get acquainted with Sinhala and Tamil, the native languages of the people. This was considered a necessity in their promotion and for salary increases, too. But this was not taken seriously by the British civil servants in the early 19th century. Hugh Nevill was an exception. One of the few.

ROBINSON: Who were some of the others?

KARIYAWASAM: Rhys Davids, the founder of the Pali Text Society, was one. He was the first Professor of Pali at University College, London. Another one was R. C. Childers, the compiler of a Pali-English dictionary. There was Henry Parker, who collected folk tales of Ceylon. H. C. P. Bell, the first Commissioner of Archeology. A. M. Hocart was the author of *The Temple of the Tooth.* You visited the temple in Kandy. These were the few scholar-administrators who served to introduce and spread Sinhala and Tamil and Pali literature during the British colonial period here. A famous Danish collector of the 19th century was Rasmus Kritiani Rask. Dr. C. E. Godakumbura printed a catalogue of his collection.
ROBINSON: You’ve referred to Hugh Nevill’s obtaining books in manuscript form. Were there no printed books in Ceylon at that time?

KARIYAWASAM: Of course, there were. Perhaps we should have referred to this when we were discussing Sirisumana Godage. Printing was introduced here by the Dutch in the 1730s. And Christian missionaries printed books here from the first decade of the 19th century. The Baptist Mission Press, the Church Missionary Society, the Christian Vernacular Education Society, the Colombo Tract Society, the Wesleyan Mission Press — they and others all printed theological books, pamphlets and tracts to spread Christianity. Hugh Nevill’s interests were elsewhere.

ROBINSON: Incidentally, Hugh Nevill died rather young, even for that time, didn’t he?

KARIYAWASAM: Yes, only 49 years. We shouldn’t forget one point. The last six years of his life Nevill was an invalid. You see, in 1891, while he was administering his duties, he was attacked by some local village people armed with stones and bricks.

ROBINSON: Oh. What happened? Why did they attack him?

KARIYAWASAM: The best way for me to answer your question is to quote from one of Hugh Nevill’s own administrative reports. He describes what happened on that fatal day.

"The abrupt succession of unusual rains after unusual droughts caused sporadic cholera to develop itself at Batticaloa, Trincomalee and Tamankaduya almost simultaneously. Here it rapidly became epidemic. Of a population of 12,800, about 441 persons were attacked, but 364 died of cholera. By constant personal effort by the medical officers and the Kachcheri in the teeth of an organized opposition to European sanitation, greater disaster was providentially averted. Many of the Vellalas, who form the most influential class
here, formed a secret combination to work up the poorer and more ignorant classes to oppose sanitation in every way. Finding our inexhaustible patience and the good sense of the lower classes successfully combatting their conspiracy, they finally employed the most ignorant of their own class, Tanakarars, with hired ruffians from Jaffna to assault the officials. Waiting until I had gone back about 45 yards to speak to some constables, and hoping thus to assault and drive off my officers in my presence without actually injuring me, this concerted mob began to stone the Additional Judge Magistrate, Mr. Steen, the Kachchri Mudaliya and the Head Sergeant. I, of course, rushed back to their help and breasted the mob while they escaped. The feelings of the rioters had, however, got beyond control, and I was pursued by a compact mob for about 160 yards, pelted with large stones and bricks. My injuries were severe and the after effects have proved worse than I at all anticipated."

ROBINSON: Apparently Nevill was a brave man. What did he mean by after effects proving worse than expected?

KARIYAWASAM: The attack left him an invalid, physically. In 1893, for example, he wrote that he could not sit down for long periods. He was living only on liquids. Furthermore, he developed gastritis. Nevertheless, he concentrated on his study of Oriental literature.

ROBINSON: Why did the Tamils oppose sanitary rules?

KARIYAWASAM: They may have had religious and social reasons.

ROBINSON: Did Nevill die before the publication of his work?

KARIYAWASAM: He had finished seven volumes of his catalogue, which was ready to print in February 1897. He died in April of that year. The government printer had sent him the proofsheets of the first 24 pages. Nevill corrected them, but he was unable to return them to the publisher.
ROBINSON: Has any of Hugh Nevill's work been published in Sri Lanka?

KARIYAWASAM: Among the collection of *ola* leaf manuscripts there were 932 poetical writings. 911 of them were published in three volumes in 1953 by P.E. P. Deraniyagala, the Director of National Museums, in Colombo. In the Ceylon National Museums Manuscript Series. In his editorial preface Dr. Deraniyagala mentioned that the *kavi* or verse section had disappeared until 1938, when Sir Paul E. Pieris pieced it together from the contents of a boxful of papers received from a member of Nevill's family. Paul E. Pieris was the Trade Commissioner for Ceylon in London. According to my teacher, Professor C. H. B. Reynolds, these papers were found at a house in Hammersmith in London. Reynolds used to be the Professor of Sinhala at the University of London School of Oriental and African Studies until his retirement a few years ago. He's a fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society. He has supervised numerous Sri Lankan research scholars for their higher degrees. He's written an introductory course in Sinhala and edited two anthologies of Sinhala literature.