<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>項目</th>
<th>内容</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>項目1</td>
<td>内容1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>項目2</td>
<td>内容2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>項目3</td>
<td>内容3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>項目4</td>
<td>内容4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*NAOSITE: Nagasaki University’s Academic Output SITE*
The Village at the Mouth of the River:
A Biography of Basil Fernando

Le Roy Robinson

I

Basil Fernando, an attorney, is a poet and short story writer.

He was born in October 1944 at Palliyawatte, a village in Hendala, Wattala, Sri Lanka.

As a young boy he attended the village primary school.

He attended high school at St. Anthony’s College, Wattala, and St. Benedict’s College, Kotahena.

In 1972 he graduated from the Faculty of Law, the University of Ceylon, Colombo.

Until December 1981 he was a teacher of English as a second language in the Sub-Department of English, Sri Jayawardenapura University, Nugegoda.

In 1982 he began his legal practice.

In 1984 Basil Fernando started working as a human rights lawyer. He filed many writs of habeas corpus and handled other cases allegedly involving torture or extra-judicial killing by the security forces of his country.

In 1989 four of his immediate colleagues were killed within a period of six months, and he was warned by a police officer friendly to him that his safety could not be guaranteed.

In September 1989 he took up work as an appeals lawyer stationed in Hong Kong by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. He reviews cases of Vietnamese refugees.
Until he was about twelve years old Wattalapedige Joseph Basil Fernando lived in Palliyawatte. A Catholic village for over 480 years (Palliya is church, watte is property), it is a coastal village. It is bounded on the north by the Indian Ocean (you can see Colombo Harbor), by the Kelani River on the west, by the Dutch Canal on the south, and by a branch of the Dutch Canal on the east.

As its name suggests, this canal was built during the Dutch colonial period as a means of transportation. As Basil Fernando is quick to point out, its construction destroyed one of the then largest rice paddy areas on the island of Ceylon.

The branch of the Dutch Canal that runs close to Fernando's house was built by a British engineer named Hamilton (sometimes the canal is called by his name) to restore the paddy area destroyed by the old Dutch Canal. But the new branch behaved the same as the old one.

In Palliyawatte there are also remains from the Portuguese colonial period — for example, the leprosy asylum just opposite the canal. (In Sinhala leprosy is parangi rogaya, the Portuguese disease.)

The physical divisions of Palliyawatte were the area close to the canal where washermen lived, the area along the sea where fishermen lived, the area between the canal and the sea where most of the land was forcibly taken by the bus owner and where the rest of the land belonged mainly to people of the farmers caste although there was no farming in the village.

Basil Fernando belongs to the generation of Sri Lankans whose best known representatives are Velupillai Prabhakaran, a leader of the Libera-
Tigers of Tamil Eelam, and Rohana Wijeweera, a leader of Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna. Both were insurrectionists.

The conscience of this generation is better represented by Dr. Ranjini Thiranagama and Richard De Zoysa, both murdered for their human rights activities.

The members of this generation were born just as the second world war was ending.

"****"

The second world war did not cause much physical damage to Ceylon. In fact, the war increased the demand for rubber, one of the country’s three main export crops. There was much more foreign exchange than before the war.

And when the British colonial government made more money, it also made sure to spend some on social welfare. This took away some of the sting from the people’s movements that had grown in strength during the first half of the 20th century, labor forming its first political party in Sri Lanka in 1935.

When Basil Fernando was growing up in Palliyawatte he heard cynics say that anyone who gave prippu (dal) and rice to the people could rule them.

"****"

In the 1940s the people of Ceylon had prippu and rice aplenty. Basil Fernando remembers his father used to say that Basil’s generation had never seen the food items and fine clothes that his father’s generation had seen.

To understand Sri Lanka now, Fernando thinks, it is necessary to appreciate that until recently the country has had plenty of food — the coun-
try's own food products and those brought in from India and a few other neighboring countries. There were no episodes of famine.

The monsoon being the only thing to worry about, putting up a small shelter to live in was not very expensive. There were no severe changes in season to be concerned about, so simple clothing usually sufficed.

Basil Fernando notes that some people say that these fortunate natural circumstances made villagers less industrious and less ambitious. Some even attribute the under-development of the subcontinent to these circumstances. Fernando responds that these natural circumstances made the lives of the poor somewhat less unbearable.

Fernando admits that there was relative poverty. But it was endurable. There was no crisis threatening survival. Then.

There was a system of cooperatives for the distribution of essential food items. Rice. Dal. Chillies. There were small quantities of coriander seeds, pepper, Maldive fish.

On the seacoast there were plenty of coconut trees. Milk was made out of the coconuts, which could also be used to make curries and sambal.

Every day fisherwomen brought lots of small fish right to the doorstep of the villagers' houses.

"There were big fish too," Basil Fernando says. Tora, mora (shark fish), balaya, kellawella (blood fish), modha (a fish that travels to and fro between sea and river), parawa, and kattawa — these were the most common. There were prawns too, sea prawns and river prawns.

Beef was available every day — except on Friday in Catholic Palliyawatte.

Mentioning these food items reminds Fernando of the various tastes that the village women were able to create in their kitchens. Spices! It was not for nothing that the Portuguese and Dutch came to Ceylon to collect spices.
The women in the seven villages in the area known as Hendala* possessed rich skills in preparing foods using coconut milk and chillie alternatively.

Fernando sometimes dwells on these preparations as an interesting aspect of the inner culture of the villages.

To supplement rice, there was kos (jak fruit) and dal (bread fruit). In the coastal areas, these were secondary food items, but, Fernando remembers, in some villages far into the countryside, kos, dal, manioc and balhala and other types of sweet potatoes were sometimes substituted for rice.

In these areas people ate fewer vegetables. Vegetables had to be brought in from markets in Colombo. The vegetable boutique owner and his wife, who took turns in looking after their little shop, had to go to Colombo a few times a week to buy these.

The only people who went to Colombo every day were the harbor workers, very few in number, who went on their bicycles.

Though Colombo was only a few kilometers away by bus, or even closer if one had the patience to cross the Kelani River by wooden boat, a trip to Colombo meant something special. When someone said “Coloba gihin enda yanawa” it meant he or she had something very special to do.

*****

Basil Fernando often thinks of the Kelani River that he crossed so many times as a child.

To grow up in an area the boundaries of which are a sea, a river and a

*Under the earliest system of local government all seven villages came under a town council. Hendala is in the Wattala electoral district. The main post office is in Wattala, as are the court for the Hendala area, the banks, and the better schools.
canal is to have had a good opportunity to watch the ways of nature.

You could really never set your foot in the same river twice. One day there was mud. The next day there was sand. One day there was pure colorless water. The next day the water would be bora watura (mud colored), suggesting there was rain in the far away mountains.

The totiya (boat man) who took people across the river was an expert about the movement of the waters. When there was a high tide, when the waters would rush towards the sea at a terrible speed, the totiya would take the boat a long way upwards before crossing the rushing river. When the boat crossed the river it came close to the totupa (the pier). In this way the boat would not be pushed towards the mouth of the river, a very turbulent place where the boat could capsize.

****

Most of the little boutiques in the village had a system of credit. "You could buy your things and pay on the week end or at the end of the month, depending on when you collected your earnings", Fernando recalls.

There were very few monthly salary earners among the villagers.

Boutique owners knew when people would receive what was due to them.

According to Basil Fernando, it was a system of mutual trust, and for the most part it worked well. When a person did not pay a bill exactly on time, a boutique owner might talk a little arrogantly — and that did the trick.

Village people had a sense of shame then, and nobody liked to be talked to in a loud voice.

Women and children were at the receiving end of boutique owners' complaints.

Men were generally proud and would go to the boutiques only when
they could go in a clean way.

Fernando notes that in a little society, where everybody not only knew each other but also knew exactly what was happening to each other, such a system of credit worked well, allowing people to avoid a desperate situation.

When somebody was really down and out, which happened only exceptionally, a boutique owner might help out even for a few months, without incurring a great loss for himself.

People always paid their debts.

Not only were neighborly relations good but also there was an absence of crime.

Basil Fernando stresses that he is not talking about a dream of paradise but about the life of the poor people in his village when he was a little boy.

He says that the state of their life was reflected in the physical appearance of men and women. The average working man looked well fed and well kept. "Constant hard work does something to the body to make it so attractive and solid".

"These men rowing their wooden boats, swimming in waters with hard currents, climbing trees, going into the deep seas to fish, working all day doing heavy physical labor, playing on Sundays under the hot sun, with the bamboo bats, carrying heavy loads on their backs, never showing signs of tiredness or fatigue, has left in me an impression of masculinity which makes me at times feel ashamed of myself. I cannot help feeling that I don’t have even one percent of the capacity for physical endurance that the men I knew in childhood had”.

*Basil Fernando is somewhat over five feet in height. He makes no claim to physical skills. But as a child he played rounders as well as other village children did.
Basil Fernando recalls one episode that he thinks illustrates the ways of these men as compared with those of their middle class neighbors.

Before telling this story, he introduces you to terminology used by the people of his village.

They referred to themselves as *samanya minissu*, ordinary people. Gentlemen were *mahathayas* and ladies *nonas*. But these terms were not always complimentary. When they were, they were *hoda* (good) — *hoda mahathaya* or *hoda nona*. Otherwise, they meant the ones who did not want to be known as ordinary people. In other words, people who were trying to imitate Europeans during colonial times.

Then Fernando tells the story.

One day the parish priest of the village organized a festival to celebrate national independence day. Some competitions were included. One was a swimming contest for adults.

Contestants had to swim across the Kelani River and back. All the contestants except one were *mahathayas* — businessmen and civil servants — from nearby villages.

The exception was Alo Singho, one of the eight people who used to take *paruwa* (big wooden boats) to dig sand from the river.

The *mahathayas*, who had had their training only in swimming pools, wore swim suits.

Alo Singh had just happened to be there and on the spur of the moment he decided to take part in the race.

He removed his sarong — and exposed his *amude* (loin cloth).

The starting signal was given. Alo Singho jumped in the water and seemed to disappear. "He was really like a fish in the water". He swam across the river and back before the *mahathayas*, who considered themselves excellent swimmers, had gone even a quarter of the way.

Some of the *mahathayas* almost drowned in the strong current and
had to be rescued by villagers who were waiting in *oruwa*(small wooden boats) at various places along the river.

For many years Alo Singho would retell to fellow villagers this incident — in some contempt for *mahattayas*.

Basil Fernando adds that in the popular mind of the villagers *mahatthaya* is a concept satirizing the kind of people trying to adjust to many worlds without belonging to any. In the last analysis village people never trusted a *mahatthaya*.

****

One of the boundaries of Palliyawatte was a bridge over the canal. Boutiques were situated near that bridge. When people went to buy something they would say *palama lagata yanawa*, going close to the bridge.

Among the four boutiques near the bridge was a grocery shop run by an Indian. It was a large shop with many items ranging from foodstuffs to cheap batteries for flashlights. People used oil lamps, so ceroline — kerosene — was one of the most sought after commodities.

The Indian merchant was called *Aiya* by his Sinhalese customers. He was just as much part of the village as anybody else.

Now almost all Indian merchants have disappeared from Sri Lankan villages and towns.

Some people say that the Sri Lankan independence movement was all about the take over of Indian businesses by Sinhalese merchants.

Basil Fernando says that there is a great deal of truth to this. In any case, he says, it is a pity since the real independence of Sri Lanka owes a great debt to Indians who shed their blood to achieve their independence.

*All adult Indian men were called *Aiya*, but not with the meaning of *aiya* as elder brother.*
from the British empire.

The British used Indian merchants to prevent food shortages in Sri Lanka by allowing them easy visa facilities.

But Indian merchants were once a symbol of good relations between India and Sri Lanka.

The most important link Sri Lanka had with the world was India.

It is unfortunate that this link is now broken. The Sri Lankan free trade policy has let everybody else into Sri Lanka to do business, and Sri Lankans and Indians, long standing neighbors, have become enemies.

***

As indicated, Basil Fernando is chiefly concerned with what might be called their inner lives — that is, the minds of the people of his village.

In the washerman’s caste community there was, he says, a tremendous inner sense of rejection. This was an enormous social and psychic phenomenon, an immense emotional experience.

Even now, he says, he has a feeling that he has not overcome this experience fully. He overcame it intellectually a long time ago, but emotionally not completely yet.

He wonders if it was a long period of history that implanted such a mental condition in the people. This is not a condition of fear. It is a sense of alienation and rejection. One feels totally powerless against it. There was some internal force, some force totally emotional that treated you as someone inferior, someone that did not have a social voice, someone that did not have a right to assert oneself outside the group of Ape minissu, our people, the people of your caste.

This mental condition was manifested in the body language of the people. When people went into samajaya, society, that is anywhere outside the area of the people of their caste, they instinctively cast down their eyes,
walked hurriedly, wanting to return to their own area as soon as possible. They put on an aloofness like that of deer as if aware that there was some hostility against them all around.

On the way and on the way back they spoke in a friendly way only with members of their own caste. Even if others spoke to you, you had to remember your place. You had to stay in your place.

Basil Fernando was told that when people of his area (ape pattne; literally our part) went to other parts of the village and entered the house of another person they were not given a chair to sit in. They had to sit on the floor or on a stool.

To Fernando’s knowledge this did not happen to any of the members of his family because his father had an attitude of not going to places where he was not wanted.

One way of avoiding humiliation was to avoid the places where you would be humiliated. Early in life Basil Fernando learned this attitude, which, he says, later helped him beyond this aspect of caste discrimination.

In his first published short story “Api Vassaka Kemathi” (We Like the Rain) he describes this aspect of “our” people’s mind:

During a monsoon rain a young boy is isolated in his house. He thinks of his father who is working at the canal, putting up a hard struggle despite hostile mill owners and a rich man trying to grab land. The boy respects his father’s will to struggle while outwardly remaining a very humble person. The boy is grateful to the rain for providing him with privacy by isolating him from a hostile social environment.

In this story Basil Fernando tries to describe a defense mechanism built into the village people over centuries of being oppressed and isolated.

“Isolation brought back our humanity denied to us by society”.

As his people used to say, “If you don’t want me once, I don’t want you a thousand times”.
A somewhat more tragic aspect of these people’s lives was the migration of many of them outside their community.

This happened in two ways. One was by employment. The other was by way of marriage.

When at the beginning of the 20th century Western style education allowed for opportunities, some parents of so-called low caste groups began to send their children to English language schools.

In Basil Fernando’s mother’s family two of her younger brothers were sent to De Maganod College, a high school run by the Christian Brothers. These two young men became accountants working in Colombo.

They married within their caste, and they received all the safeguards available to them within the caste. Acceptance of their identity. Protection from challenges to self-esteem from caste-based prejudices.

But at school and at work they were exposed to the discrimination and psychological pressures put on their caste. Most of the time they had to be secretive about their identity. They were always very discreet in the way they behaved with others.

At anytime someone might have turned to them and said “Adoradawa” (you bloody washerman) and thus disgrace them before other people.

They learned not to be aggressive, if only to avoid insults in public.

Sometimes someone with guts would emerge, who, if confronted in this way, would retaliate in a telling way and stop that type of insult under the threat of using physical means.

At that point, Basil Fernando says, psychological pressures would break down, and the “higher” caste person would look for shelter.
Caste-based insults were a form of bullying. Their purpose was to maintain a state of intimidation so that everybody would be kept in their place.

This meant that those who enjoyed the little privileges available in a yet underdeveloped economy and society could continue to do so. The immigrants or competitors for these positions would be kept out.

There was a conspiracy against equality of opportunity.

The extremely sophisticated nature of this psychological warfare, as Fernando calls it, gives a far better insight into the mind of the Sinhala people and into the sort of crimes that developed among them against each other.

They consider themselves one race physically, but psychologically they have been deeply and fundamentally divided for a long time.

Some may say, “Tamils, too, are like that. They have an even worse system of caste discrimination”.

But that is not an answer. It is only an excuse — and not a good excuse at that.

The decadence that developed in Sri Lanka was a result of, among other things, this extremely backward social consciousness.

To enter the 20th century with a social consciousness that is rooted in medieval times could not have resulted in anything but disaster.

In the middle of the 20th century Sri Lankans entered their period of national independence with such backwardness of mind and psyche that they reaped the harvest of violence that has shocked the world.

*There were only a few Tamils living in Palliyawatte at that time. They belonged to the more affluent class. Fernando says there was no sense of discrimination then.
To continue with that backwardness of consciousness can only cause worse results.

****

As for those of the washerman caste who migrated outside their group by marrying outside that caste...

In Palliyawatte this never happened during Basil Fernando’s childhood there. Then older people regarded marriage out of caste as a folly that would end up in unhappiness. These old people had an earthy wisdom and a sense of what was possible and impossible in the social circumstances of those days.

But in the 1950s and 1960s when more people moved physically out of the caste structure for employment purposes, in Sri Lanka as a whole marriage by personal choice became more frequent and there were more intercaste marriages.

These people were exposed to very great humiliations and difficulties.

For example, the family and the relatives of one caste or the other would not participate in the marriage ceremonies.

The children of this marriage would be humiliated in the family circle of one caste or the other.

Among the Catholics in Palliyawatte the basic marriage ceremonies were called avasargenima, which literally means getting permission, it in fact meant the engagement, the wedding mass and wedding day ceremonies, and pahuwada gamana (literally the next day’s visit) meant the return of the couple to the bridegroom’s home. The couple was accompanied by the parents and relatives and friends of the bride.

The family that considered itself the higher caste often boycotted the ceremonies to humiliate the other group.

This does not imply the so-called higher caste people were richer. In
economic terms they might even have been much poorer.

There is a common saying: *Wanse kabal ganawa*, frying the caste. This comes from a popular fable:

Once a high caste person who was poor had a visitor. According to custom, dinner had to be served. The host asked his wife to prepare the dinner. There was nothing at home to prepare the dinner with. The wife put some sand on the frying pan and began to turn with the coconut shell spoon. The host heard the sound and asked his wife what she was cooking. She replied loudly enough to be heard by the guest, *Vanse cabal ganawa*.

********

Speaking of his family, Basil Fernando says there ought to have been eight brothers and sisters. But three children died very young, two before Basil and one after him. These three were all girls.

About the last of these, Fernando has written the poem "Evelyn, My First Friend".

Evelyn, named after the only daughter of Pepayin Fernando’s employer, was six at the time. Basil was eight. Both were hospitalized. An uncle, sorry to see them in the hospital, took them back home. Basil, "too selfish", complained that his sister was being given more attention than he was.

Treatment — a mustard plaster on her chest — by a local Ayurvedic doctor made her condition worse. She was taken to another doctor who tried to save her life. In vain.

"Evelyn, My First Friend" says:

They brought you back
Dressed like a little angel.

********
Up to the 1950s the number of village children who died at an early age was very high. The rate of deaths at child birth was very much higher.

For villagers hospitals were far off, and people were not yet used to them. If someone said "so and so was taken to hospital" the unspoken message was "he probably will die".

Aside from their prejudice against hospitals village people wanted to be treated according to the Ayurveda system of medicine that they were used to for centuries before they tried Western medicine.

Often Ayurvedic treatment took such a long time that by the time a patient was seen by a Western doctor it was too late.

Basil Fernando further admits that the local practitioners in his area were not a credit to the Ayurvedic system. In regard to their humaneness, Fernando points out there is much to say in praise of them. They were kind hearted men, no doubt, and always accessible to people. Their fees were very low. As a matter of ethics they made it very clear that even if a patient could not pay they would treat him or her anyway. They were in fact quite friendly, and they came to the houses of patients to treat them.

The problem was that their knowledge of medicine was limited.

Basil Fernando knows of great Ayurvedic practitioners, some of whom even had an international reputation. One Buddhist monk, Neelammara Hamuduruwo for example, had a great reputation for the treatment of the mentally ill. Basil Fernando remembers a story about the monk's treatment of an Indian maharajah's son, who had the habit of eating shoes. He may have been treated in some institution in London, without success. The monk cured the young man and was rewarded by the maharajah.

*Athec barata wastuwa denawa* means giving treasure to the weight of an elephant. This is what the monk was supposed to have been given — plus a young elephant!

The monk is dead now, but his temple Neelammahhra is still there.
Basil Fernando has visited it. When the monk was still alive, the villagers were asked to board the patients who came for treatment. This benefitted both villagers and patients.

Treatment of mental patients while keeping them under family care and natural surroundings was a very progressive concept, Fernando points out.

Today mental patients are treated in hospitals. They are drugged to the extent that they change their usual human responses. In many cases they become permanently ill.

The monk used herbal oil that he made himself instead of drugs. After treatment most of his patients went back home and lived normal lives. The monk classified "pissuwa", mental illness, into many categories, and he treated each differently.

Fernando was once told of one instance of a women who began to act abnormally after her first child was born.

Her husband, a lawyer, who told the story to Basil, said he was asked by many people to take his wife to a mental institute. Instead, he took her to this monk. He finally cured her for good.

The monk told the laweyer that his wife's illness was the result of some biological problems resulting from maladjustments after child birth, and that this was known in the Ayurvedic medical system he had studied.

Thus this woman was saved from drugs that a Western oriented doctor would have prescribed for her.

Fernando says he has also heard of almost miraculous treatments for bone fractures, *kadum* & *bidum*. "There's a subtle difference of meaning in the two words." When some hard stuff, say wood, breaks, it is *kadum*. When something like glass breaks it is *bidum*.

Even today a lot of village people prefer Ayurvedic treatment for fractures and wounds.
Fernando’s oldest uncle, known as Anthoni Aiya or Anthoni Veda Mahatthaya, who died a few years ago at the of 96, was himself a well known practitioner of Ayurvedic medicine. Patients stayed at his home and were treated for weeks at a time.

When sometime in the late 50’s Fernando’s oldest sister Agnes had a wound she was treated by some western doctors and her wound became very much worse. She couldn’t even walk. One doctor said an amputation might be necessary.

When Fernando’s uncle heard about this he came and took the young woman to his home and treated her with herbal pastes. In about three months she was completely cured.

When Fernando says the Ayurvedic doctors of his village lacked adequate knowledge he does not mean to be disrespectful of this system of medicine. The truth was that quite a lot of people died of illnesses that today would be considered quite ordinary and would be cured even without the patient having to lose time from work.

Fernando lost a younger sister to simple pneumonia, and he himself lost two years of schooling at the age of six, due to an illness caused by worms. During that illness, he has been told, he was close to death many times.

An often remembered quotation in the family is that he once asked his mother “Will you save me this time too?”

Later this saved him from any punishments by his father, who used to say that when he took the cane into his hand he would think of this incident and he would put aside the cane. Basil Fernando was thus one of the least punished children of his village.

*****

Regarding punishments, most villagers had very old ideas. They
believed in harsh punishments. They had learned these concepts from their parents and teachers.

Sometimes a boy would be tied to a tree and kept there under the hot sun, often without food for half a day or even a whole day.

Sometimes big red ants were let loose on the body of the boy thus tied. The *dimiyo*, big red ants, laid eggs on the large leaves of some trees and when the eggs broke there were thousands of ants on these leaves. If you plucked one leaf, that leaf would have enough ants on it to make the toughest boy scream in no time.

Someone had put into the head of the villagers the idea that harsh punishments transformed bad boys into good ones, if not immediately, at least in their adulthood. This did not happen. Many of the boys grew even more stubborn.

The punishments to girls were meted out only by women and were very mild.

* ***

Another aspect to this was that the villagers of those days knew that only physical strength helped them to survive. Children had to begin their working life early, often at the age of twelve. If they were to join the adults early in life, they had to lose their physical fears early. These punishments were ways of achieving such ends.

There may have been some heartlessness involved in all these punishments, but the life of these people who survived on their physical strength was mostly a hard one.

Their lives were certainly not short. Most of them lived to their seventies. But their lives were hard and even brutish.

The adults had no illusion about what awaited their children. They loved them enormously, but the sense of fatalism they had inherited from
earlier generations hung over them all the time.

Unconsciously they thought that all they could rely on was their bodies. One result was they developed an astounding amount of physical endurance.

Women too worked very hard, of course.

Basil Fernando admits that he always feels ashamed of himself when he compares himself with them physically. When he now hears about what extraordinary physical capacities of which people have proved themselves even in places like concentration camps, he doesn't doubt it, because of what he had seen himself all around him in his childhood.

When he saw the film of Ben Hur working in the ship's galley, he was reminded of his village neighbor Anthony, who was doing labor he hired himself out for on a day to day basis. The last time Basil saw Anthony, who is close to seventy now, Anthony told Basil he was going to sea everyday as a hired hand on a boat.

As for physical punishments, Fernando tells of a man he once wrote a poem about. The name by which the man was known in their village was Maci. In his poem Fernando made him Osi. The reason was that, since the poem was written in Sinhala, someone might tell the man that Basil had written a poem about him, and Maci would think there was something really wrong with Fernando.

The poem deals with a man who has a profound knowledge of the movements of the waters, the deep and shallow places of the canal and the Kelani River, and of the "moods" of the river. He is like a heron. He knows little about the world and the world knows little about him.

Maci would never think that there was anything significant in his life to write a poem about.

Fernando says that this does not mean that Maci lacked wit, but his wit was of a different type. When he had gone to school a long time ago, he
had studied up to about the fifth grade, which was a great deal of education then.

Once his class was asked by their teacher to write a letter asking their fathers for some money. The children had to think of some excuse to ask for money. Maci’s letter was to this effect: Dear Father, kindly send me ten rupees, to take my wife to hospital. She is expecting a baby. Your loving son, Maci.

The teacher got so carried away by the humor that he took the boy under a tree and hit him till he climbed to the top of the tree. It was the teacher’s way of teaching a boy a lesson.

Basil Fernando now wonders whether even the teacher knew what was the lesson he was trying to teach. Perhaps he wanted Maci to be less romantic. Maci, adds Fernando, remains a bachelor to this day!

********

Three places were used for sodal gatherings in Palliyawatte: the church, the school, and the toddy tavern.

Palliyawatte literally means church property. The first church must have been built there two hundred years earlier.

It was often called Wella-palliya or church by the beach. Wala means sand. When people said “wellate yanawa” they meant they were going to the beach.

It is possible that, before there was a village there, there were Catholics in the area.

Conversions had started from 1505, after the arrival of the Portuguese.

It’s hard to say whether the first to arrive in the area were Christians, but they were converts from Buddhism.

According to Fernando, even today the type of religion in Palliyawatte
is externally Christian, but the contents of people's beliefs are basically Bud-
dhistic.

An early Sri Lankan Christian poet once wrote: "Whether there is
another world or not, it is better to do good".

Fernando says this is the way local Christianity was adjusted to the
local people's doubts regarding the existence of the next world.

Religious disputes were resolved in a pragmatic way. Conflicting con-
cepts were allowed to co-exist. Even now the local people consider conflicts
based solely on ideological differences to be very irritating.

The Christian missionaries had preferred to leave it that way.

Knowledge of religion on the part of the masses of Catholics was
limited to a small catechism book that they had to memorize at school.

The book was in question and answer from:

Q. How many gods are there?
A. Only one.

Q. How many persons are there in one god?
A. Three.

At Hindu kovils in nearby Hendala people had seen hundreds of gods.
So these questions did not mean much to them. Some people even made fun
of the catechism in a good-humored way.

There was the well-built fair-skinned John-Hiya, a washerman, who
was one of the few rural atheists in this village. He used to call piously
brought up boys like Basil and ask Siyatu theta nayakaya kauda?(Literally, Who is the leader of all things?) "Who is the master of all creation?" Basil
and his friends would answer Diyan vahanse ("God").

John Aiya would then say that was a wrong answer. The boys would
then ask: "Who then?" He always replied, seriously, "I, John-Hiya".

The only thing that the village people could identify easily with in
Christianity was the image of Christ on the cross, in loincloth only, suffer-
When washerman and fishermen went to work they wore only the loincloth, and they were always lonely and suffering.

It was the season of Lent that they liked most, the commemoration of the passion of Christ.

That period every year was the most intensely religious period in the village.

In the middle of the church a huge cross was erected, a life size statue of Christ fixed to it.

There was a three hour long ceremony, at the end of which a screen covering the statue was pulled down while the sounds of funeral music were made.

Women came to this ceremony dressed all in black, a dress female members of a family would wear at the death of a family member.

They bought big candles from the altar boys and lit them.

At a time when to lose a child or even children by early death was common and to lose a husband by accident was not too uncommon, these women really saw in the Good Friday celebration a celebration of their own sorrowful lives.

Adults prepared for this event by singing "Pasan", lyrics in Sinhala.*

The Biblical story of the death of Christ had been written in accordance with Sinhala poetic tradition, particularly the way some Buddhist stanzas are sung, by some foreign priest or priests who learned the local conditions, to be better able to communicate the Catholic massage to more people of the coastal areas.

---

*Dr. Ediriweera Sarachchandra, who began his career as a teacher at St. Peter's College, has acknowledged that he benefited from this Sinhala lyric while he was developing his dramas, which were milestones of Peradeniya University culture.
During the Sinhala Revival, “Pasan” became the subject matter of research.

Cassette tapes are now available.

However, due to media imperatives, the accompanying refinement has reduced the power of these songs compared to the powerful singing of untrained villagers who brought to their singing the feelings that arose directly from their hard and sad lives.


A rural man lived close to death all the time. At the very depth of his being he live in a state of bewelderment. He felt helpless before his inescapable fate, Even his close link with his own little community was not capable of producing in him any inner sense of security... his self-acknowledged ignorance of the process of nature, added to the indifference of society as to what happened to him, contributed to his ultimate fears.

With that state of mind, he believed in, he needed to believe in, miracles that only God was capable of performing.

Fernando says he has heard of a villager, a fisherman who fished in the Kelani River, who did not go to church often, praying on a Good Friday, somewhat loudly: “Deiyane(Dear God), I have asked for this from you, once, twice, thrice. If you can’t do this, you ought to have told me. Koranda barinum mata ekka kiyane epaye. Anyway, I won’t come to bother you again.”

When it came to the worst, rural Christians believed in a putting a little threat, by way of unmalicious blackmail, to their gods. “I will not come here again” meant that the speaker might go to a Buddhist temple or a nearby Hindu kovil, or some local man who engaged in some sort of black magic.

Such threats, though seriously made and sometimes even followed up,
were only a way of teasing. People teased their gods the same way they teased politicians — by threatening to replace them. Such threats were never malicious. These people always remained children at heart, particularly when they were the most helpless.

***

The parish church, of course, was the center of the limited social activities that took place in the village.

The most common and most well attended activity was a funeral. There was a sense of obligation in the people to pay last respects to one of their fellow villagers.

At least one member of each family would attend a funeral, besides visiting the house of the dead person, while the body was still kept at home.

It was usually one night or two at most that a body would be kept at home before a funeral.

(Now, waiting for the return of family members gone abroad for employment, dead bodies may be kept at home much longer.)

People believed in ghosts. They did everything possible to give a proper funeral to the dead person so that he or she would not have a hurt feeling — or would not come back to trouble them.

In these beliefs were rooted the fear and the guilt of hurting old people and being disrespectful towards the dead.

Fernando would go so far so to say that belief in and fear of ghosts was one of the most important aspects of the conditioning of the mind of rural Christians.

Fernando admits that because he is not rooted by means of personal experience in the Buddhist experience, he is speculating, but he thinks the rural Christians had assimilated these psychological attitudes from pre-Christian society, which in the coastal areas of Sri Lanka where Sinhalese
Fernando says he has often tried to find some reason why people wanted a final emotional severance from their dead, but he could not find any explanation from what the people told him.

It was a characteristic of the people he knew in his childhood not to speak of the things that mattered to them most. Among them there was a profound silence regarding the matters that touched them most deeply.

Perhaps they feared themselves, Fernando wonders, though they said they feared ghosts.

People feared emotions that were too deep, and they had a genuine fear that they might go insane.

Too much thinking and too much grieving were discouraged.

People who lived with a sense of danger to their very physical existence also had a fear of losing their mental balance.

In their experience once a man or woman lost that balance they could never regain it.

So the advice they gave each other (not in so many words) was: do not get too close to the edge of that balance, keep a safe distance.

People living on their physical strength needed to keep body and soul together at whatever cost.

In Palliyawatte the parish priest was undoubtedly the leader of the village.

There was a *ralahami*, of course, the government official in the old system of administration who issued the rice ration books and dealt with small complaints, but his position was not of much significance to the villagers, socially.

There were village council members and other such local politicians.

---

*Ralahami* now refers to constables.
who failed to win any special respect.

The *schola mahathayas* (teachers) and the *ueda mahathayas* had a little more respect.

But it was always the parish priest who had first place in the hearts of the people.

These parish priests were trained to adjust to local prejudices. They also knew the subtleties, as Fernando puts it, of adjustment to richer or so-called better folk without hurting the poorer people.

Their art consisted of using kind-hearted words and generous gestures and proper smiles, keeping the people happy but distant.

Beyond what was obvious, people were not too inquisitive about what their priest said or did.

It was the reform-minded priests that got into trouble.

The troubles were always created by the better off people, who felt threatened by even the slightest change.

One parish priest was Restoldo, a Frenchman of about thirty years of age, who came to Palliyawatte as parish priest when Basil Fernando was about six or seven.

Restoldo was about five feet tall and had a round face and a smart look. He was full of life all the time.

He remained in Palliyawatte for four years, being forced away after the *mooppurala* (the lay leader of the village, a local businessman), the *sangitha* master (the choir master) and a few other better off people sent *hora petsam* (false petitions) to the arch-bishop.

Basil Fernando never met Restoldo after that and heard only a little more about him. He has a very vivid memory of this man and a profound respect for him.

When looking back, Fernando thinks that the priest’s motorcycle, which he drove very fast, is the best symbol to explain his problem.
The road leading to the parish church was a narrow road with many holes in it. Other roads in the village were gravel roads or just foot paths. Despite his good motorcycle and his skill in riding it, he could not move fast.

Such was the conflict in everything he wanted to do.

Being a Frenchman, Restoldo chose to ignore these local prejudices. They would have appeared irrational to him. So when he chose altar boys he looked only for bright boys.

Once he chose some boys from the fishermen’s and washermen’s castes.

He could not have known that he was making very bitter enemies.

Basil Fernando was one of those chosen as altar boys. As young as he was then he was aware of the tension that Restoldo’s choice caused. Basil was glad to be a silent partner in this conflict.

No one approached Restoldo to explain to him about caste considerations. Anyway, no one would have dared to, for the young priest soon acquired a reputation of being a "no nonsense type".

So the plotting against him went on silently behind closed doors.

Another matter that angered the better off folks was the priest’s initiative in a project to enlarge the boys school.

The Church then ran the village schools in Catholic areas. In Palliyawatte there were two schools, one for boys, one for girls.

The girls school was managed by Good Shepherd nuns. There were a few resident nuns to look after the girls. Basil Fernando had his first two years of schooling at Good Shepherd.

The school for boys had classes from grade two to grade eight. (Now they have classes up to grade ten.)

The boys school building was small and old. So Father Restoldo laid the foundation for a bigger school. The building as it stands today was built
on that foundation.

Not satisfied with starting to enlarge the building, he checked to see who came to school and who didn’t. He made all kinds of efforts to encourage the poorer people to send their children to school.

In this respect the fishermen were the worst. They needed all the hands they could get to help on their boats. As a result, boys growing up had to give up their schooling by the time they were in grade two or three. (Most girls dropped out of school after grade five.)

Under the pressure of the priest some children were allowed to have their schooling for a longer time.

Unfortunately, the better off people saw a threat in this too.

Fernando says this was a phenomenon witnessed in every part of Sri Lanka. There is much fiction and poetry based on similar situations.

Father Restoldo also started a group of young Christian students and young Christian workers. This was viewed as a radical organization within the church.

At that time, the national chaplain of the Young Christian Workers movement was Henk Schram, to whom Basil Fernando later dedicated his book of poems “Evelyn, My First Friend”.

Fernando was too young then to join either of these groups, but his brother Antony was a prominent member of both while he was a student. He was the blue-eyed boy of both Restoldo and Schram, Basil says.

As a student he was very popular. He was a very good organizer. So the priests found him very useful. He became national president of the Young Christian Students Movement and while still a student attended a meeting of the World Assembly of Youth. He carried off almost all the prizes in his class and won a gold medal for elocution. At school Antony’s nickname was Tagore. Later he was a student of poetry in P. B. Alwis Perera’s correspondence school.
When invited to take leadership the so-called ignorant poor people responded and showed their initiative. Part of Basil Fernando’s personal formation came from his listening to them and watching them.

Fernando witnessed not only their abilities but also how resentments grew against them in such an unreasonable manner.

In one way, he says, he is not surprised by the violence that erupted in Sri Lanka within the last decade.

The inner tensions he has witnessed all his life were so primitive and so unreasonable that one day they had to erupt if they were not resolved in a mature, reasonable and creative way.

Men like Henk Schram and Father Restoldo were there everywhere in the country whatever the religion of the people, whatever the race.

But like both of them these others too were suppressed, and the “primitive elements”, the decadent elements, had their way.

Society marched towards a crisis that today is a catastrophe.

So Restoldo was transferred.

Basil Fernando remembers how much he himself cried on hearing of the priest’s transfer. He knew he had lost a friend who had awakened him to realize something with which he would have to live all his life.

It would be lucky, Fernando thinks, for any child to know such men as Restoldo and Schram in their early years.

Restoldo’s transfer was the closing of a chapter for Basil Fernando too.

He remembers one day when he was ten or eleven years old when he decided to run away from home. He walked up to the Indian merchant’s
boutique, but he did not know where to go from there. He did not have any money. He was dressed in a sarong and a banian, which is what boys wore then at home.

Not knowing how to proceed, Basil sat down on one of the steps of the boutique. The Indian merchant, who knew that Basil's father did not like his children to roam around, found Basil's presence rather unusual.

Usually Basil and his brother would come to the boutique to buy things and then turn to go away at once. Being an Indian, the merchant must have been well aware of children who would sometimes run away from home. Perhaps, he was one himself, ending up in Ceylon.

Basil Fernando has heard that such things were common in India, but it was not the case in Sri Lanka, and it hardly ever happened in his native village, Palliyawatte.

The Indian merchant approached Basil solicitously. In a very casual way he asked Basil why he was there. Basil smiled at him and gave him some pretext that may have been acceptable to the merchant, so that he ignored Basil for some time.

A few hours later Basil's brother came and was surprised to find him at the boutique. He told Basil that everybody was looking for him everywhere in the village and that their father was angry with their mother for not watching where the children were.

Basil's brother tried to persuade him to go back home, but Basil refused to listen to him. Telling the Indian merchant to keep an eye on Basil, his brother went away.

The Indian merchant was rather kind to Basil, several times inquiring whether he wished to eat or drink something. These offers Basil "rather ungraciously" refused.

A little later Basil's father arrived. Basil's brother had informed him where he was. Basil remembers his father had a cane in his hand.
When he saw Basil his father did not say or do anything but just looked at him and took him by the hand and led him home. His father’s face showed much feeling. Basil remembers walking home with him very “picturesquely”.

Basil Fernando says that his motives for that attempt to escape were very complex. Perhaps he had realized that he was trapped in Palliyawatte. There was a lot of anger in him against the discrimination he had seen and experienced. And the realization was growing within him to the effect that if he continued to stay in that village he would not be able to effectively fight back against discrimination.

Maybe he also realized that he had already learned everything that the village had to offer him, and, if he had to resolve the riddles that the village had created in his mind, he had to look outward.

When your childhood is crowded with difficulties, you grow mature much faster, Basil says.

And by that time he was quite mature in many ways. After all, most of his classmates had started their working lives around this time.

Perhaps Basil might also have come to the unconscious realization that unless he made some protest he might not have a chance to go to college.

Many misfortunes had happened to Basil Fernando’s family, and perhaps his mother, who was the one most determined to educate her sons, could not afford to sustain her determination.

The most disturbing thing was his father’s illness. He had a pain in the chest for which he had gone to many doctors.

There was then a well known specialist in Colombo named Dr. Hendley, who had told Basil’s father that he had a serious blood pressure problem and that he had to be careful.

The burden of caring for the family fell on Basil’s mother.
A very difficult time had come upon the family.

His two older sisters had to do a lot of work alongside their mother. The younger of the two was very intelligent, perhaps the most intelligent member of the family. The nuns in the school were very fond of her, and she came out first in the district in some examination on religion. She was very disappointed when she had to stop going to school.

Add to Basil Fernando’s family’s difficulties his father’s unfortunate belief that there was no point in educating girls. This stood in Basil’s sister’s way despite many pleadings on her behalf by the nuns and teachers.

Perhaps Basil’s father was blinded by the experience that in his family history there was no woman who had taken to education.

Basil’s mother, who had studied to be a teacher, may have thought differently, but when his father insisted he had his way.

An incident is often recalled in the family which to some extent explains the father’s way of thinking. When he had gone to a hospital he saw some young nurses joking with a doctor. He had come home and told Basil’s mother, “I don’t want my daughters to behave like that”.

He belonged to the old world that considered the woman’s place to be in the home. And only there.

The only conclusion that Basil’s protest led the family to arrive at was that he was very unhappy and that they must soon send him to the school where his brother was going.

So in 1956 he was admitted to St. Anthony’s College, Wattala.

Some people think that rural people are simpletons. Not the real rural people, Basil Fernando says, not those of his father’s generation. He thinks his grandfather’s generation must have been even smarter.

Take the word “smart”. It means one thing to people who see it purely as some external things, habits of dress, habits of speech, and things like that.
But when a real crisis comes, all smartness disappears, and the image that is finally left is not very beautiful.

The people that Fernando is talking about behaved smart to people who did not consider them human beings, behaved with appropriate deference, cleverly defending themselves.

They had real, solid, deep, or ultimate relationships with those they considered their own. With those who attributed to them an inferior status they played the game appropriately like the child who plays the dwarf in children’s games.

This however did not affect their self-esteem, according to Fernando, because their real life was their life within their group, and everything was very real there.

*****

Fernando has read a lot on the state of mind described as depression. Most studies attribute suicide to this state of mind. The state of depression causes and sometimes results in loss of self-esteem.

In the little social group that Fernando grew up in there was never a case of suicide. Nor is there now, he says, though the group had disintegrated due to modern social pressures.

At the time the concept of depression was hardly known to Fernando’s people. He thinks the reason is that they had a real sense of social belonging, They had ultimate trust in each other. That trust was the result of their existential experience.

If a child lost his mother while still an infant some other woman who also had a child of the same age would breast feed her. (Children were always breast fed then).

There was no case of abandoned children. When there was some misfortune the child was adopted by another family. From then on they
were the sons and daughters with equal shares of whatever the adoptive family had.

Sometimes if a mother died in child birth leaving an infant, a sister or cousin of the mother would marry the father of the child and bring up the child.

This happened in Fernando's family. When his older sister was born her mother died at child birth — a frequent occurrence in Sri Lanka those days. Fernando's mother married her sister's husband, Basil's father.

There was no concept of half sister or half brother in that society.

According to Basil Fernando, to understand an ordinary Sinhala family there are two important concepts that one ought to know.

One is the idea of Mama, or maternal uncle.

The other is Luku Aiya, eldest brother.

The idea of Mama is expressed very well by a common saying: "When the mother's breasts run dry milk develops in Mama's."

If the parents die when the children are young, or if they become totally incapacitated, it becomes the duty of the Luku Aiya to bring up the younger brothers and sisters.

In such a case, Luku Aiya will marry only after the marriages of the younger siblings.

Basil Fernando's mother's eldest brother, Anthoni, an Ayurvedic doctor, was an embodiment of perfect fulfillment of both these roles.

After the death of Basil's maternal grandfather, who died after being stung by hornets, the care of four sisters and two brothers fell on him.

He educated the two boys, and, to use a common expression, deega denawa, he "gave the sisters in marriage" before he himself got married.

Anthoni engaged in two professions. One was the treatment of patients who suffered from fractures. The other was as a washerman, employing four or five hired hands.
In fact, his treatment of patients was almost always free of charge. Anthoni said that he engaged in Ayurvedic medicine because he learned it from his father. It was part of his inheritance.

As the eldest son, a sense of family obligation weighed on him.

In later life, his wife, Basil’s aunt, Nanda (whom Basil called Ana Nanda) was his partner in this Ayurvedic practice which involved quite a lot of work.

Nanda was a very generous woman and energetic woman who loved her husband and Basil and her other nephews very much.

Basil says that Anthoni and Nanda were one of the most loving couples he can think of.

Nanda made the herbal oils, which took her days each time; she made herbal pastes and herbal drinks. In the absence of her husband, she attended to patients with minor complaints.

Besides she had to prepare the morning, noon and night meals for her husband’s helpers, who lived in a separate building near the family house.

Basil Fernando’s Mama (maternal uncle) had a bullock cart in which he took the ironed clothes to Colombo, to the richer families who were his customers. The journey would usually take a whole night, and he would return only on the next night.

When somebody did not have enough land on which to put up a little house (which was very rarely the case) a neighbor who had a little larger piece of land would allow him to build on it. There was no fear of somebody claiming prescriptive rights. If the owner needed the land back, say to give it to his son or daughter, the user would move out, and some other neighbor would help him in the same way.

Fernando says he has not heard of anyone among these people ending up on the streets.

Another aspect of their strength was the way they looked after their
old. This was never spoken of as a problem. No old man or woman ever went to an old people’s home or some charity house.

It was not only the immediate family that helped the old. Everyone around, helped them, particularly the young girls.

A young girl or young boy pounded betel aricanut for an old man or woman who had lost his or her teeth or who had very weak teeth but still wanted to have the taste of betel.

These people coped with the long illness of old people.

Basil Fernando’s grandmother was bed-reddened with paralysis of one side for over four years. He still remembers her as a very cheerful old woman. Her name was Helena. From accounts repeated in the family, her first question in the morning and the last at night was about her grandchildren, who were quite young then.

If, for example, Basil’s older brother, who used to go to school meetings and came home late, had not returned yet, she would not fall asleep no matter how late it was.

She was consulted. Her opinions were respected until the very last.

Basil’s mother used to tell everyone proudly of the last compliment his grandmother had paid to her: “No daughter would have looked after me better than you have done.”

To have the blessing of their old people was one of the things the rural people aspired to.

Their ideas of achievement were very different from those of the present day.

When someone was really ill, there were many people to keep vigil. There were no electric lights in those days. Rural people used oil lamps. A few had petrel lamps.

These were brought to a neighbor’s house when there was difficulty in that house.
People used to say: *Ut theta nathi kaduwda koskofandada*. "What is the use of a sword that is not for war? Is it to pound the jak fruit?" They meant what use is a man who is not there to help a person when he is in trouble?